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ABSTRACT

Attempting to reconcile theory with facts, this booklet explores equity and quality issues involved with parental choice in Massachusetts. Following an overview and summary, chapters 2 and 3 examine the theory and practice of intradistrict public school choice. Chapter 2 examines the controlled choice plans adopted by cities, arguing that racial balance goals strongly limit parental choice. Families who can afford to exercise true choice flee the system, weakening the schools and exacerbating the racial and social segregation dictated by residential plans. Chapter 3 examines whether market pressure will spur school improvement. Although eliminating racial balance controls is a good first step, many parents will remain uninformed and are unlikely to demand academically superior schooling. As chapter 4 suggests, interdistrict choice is desirable, but unlikely to create a competitive market or solve the problem of poor schools. Chapter 5 discusses educational vouchers--choice that includes private and parochial options--and outlines a possible course of action for Massachusetts and other states. Vouchers should be tested with a 5-year demonstration project financed with private funds. The book includes chapter notes and an index. (MLH)

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EDUCATION IN MASSACHUSETTS

SCHOOL CHOICE IN MASSACHUSETTS

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Education in Massachusetts Series

School Choice in Massachusetts

Abigail Thernstrom

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INTRODUCTION

"School choice" has meant many things in the last two decades, and been put forward from many political quarters to serve many different purposes. It has been espoused by the left and the right, the religious and the irreligious, the wealthy and the poor, but today it is espoused by such a wide chorus of supporters as to have lost most of the political characteristics that marked it in the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s. The strongest assist recently given to the various forms of school choice has come from the rising reputation of the free market as a mechanism best designed to achieve both economic growth and individual freedom. The free market has been identified with the right in this country, but when it is most enthusiastically espoused by democrats who have just recently, in a remarkably peaceful revolution, overthrown the communist states of central Europe, and by the democratic dissidents in the Soviet Union and China, the free market loses much of its political coloring and appears as only good common sense.

The main opponents of programs of choice today appear to be school establishments and public school teachers and their organizations, and whatever the important public functions they carry out, both are easily attacked as defenders of a special and even selfish interest. They find it difficult to defend their opposition to school choice as based on an overriding public interest in getting the best possible education for children. The fact that we have public school systems marked by many failures, in contrast with our leading competitors among advanced industrial states, perhaps in contrast with our own past, does not give strong support for a policy that calls for more of the same, with more money than we now spend added on, and with only marginal changes.

And so school choice: It is supported by the newly respectable arguments for free markets, by our new respect for competition to weed out the incompetent and strengthen the effective, by the overwhelming failure of public education in the inner cities, by the flight of middle-class parents, and indeed any parents who can manage it, from the more bureaucratized big-city systems to parochial and private schools, or to suburban schools, and by arguments for equity, for if the middle class does it, why shouldn't we help the working class do it?

Much of the debate is conducted by means of argument, often very skillful argument, but argument conducted in the absence of empirical data. But as Abigail Thernstrom demonstrates in her analysis of the varieties of school choice that have been proposed, in Massachusetts in particular there is a good deal of data. We have school choice programs with as much as ten years of experience in some communities, we have Metco with an even longer run of experience. The argument cannot be settled by the analysis of these experiences, but much light is thrown on them by such an analysis.

Her exploration is a nonpolitical one, and a nonideological one: No position in the public spectrum is sacrosanct, and the only overriding concern is what is best for our children, all our children, what is best for the Commonwealth, and what is in conformity with the values all of us hold as the highest we try to realize in our public life.

By its nature, such an analysis, undertaken seriously, cannot be partisan and cannot be simple. There are many difficult questions about school choice which, as Dr. Thernstrom points out, even the best arguments cannot settle. How truly interested are parents in their children's education? How much effort will they devote to examining choices made available? Where can they get the information relevant to such choices? Will entrepreneurs respond to choice by creating new schools—and will they be schools that we applaud or deplore? What will be the effect of varieties of school choice, unconstrained by considerations of desegregation, on the prospects for integration? These and many other questions are explored here, and an ingenious voucher proposal detailed, which offers promise of giving us some light on all these questions.

After all the questions she proposes, and the serious and critical examination of the issues she conducts, Dr. Thernstrom still finds the overriding consideration the virtue of choice itself: "choice is a value in itself: individual liberty, personal dignity, and the opportunity to choose are inseparable."

Nathan Glazer

April 26, 1991 *Cambridge, Massachusetts*

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The study's conclusions are, of course, my own.

CHAPTER ONE

Overview and Summary

The president is on board; so is the secretary of education. School choice is on the national agenda. "I don't know how we ever got into a situation of telling parents where they have to send their kids to school," Lamar Alexander likes to say.[1]

It's a "situation" that is already changing. In some school districts, parents can now choose among the public schools on a space-permitting and (often) race-permitting basis. (Desegregation guidelines frequently limit choices.) In nine states parents can select a public school in another district altogether. And finally, in one city (Milwaukee) a limited number of black students are now using public money to attend private schools. They are participants in a voucher program that is under state court review.

The notion of choice has obvious appeal. Some parents want to send their children to the closest school. Others prefer the school closest to where they work. Some like a disciplined atmosphere; others are drawn to open classrooms. Some are looking for a strong performing arts program, others for Greek and Latin. These are all legitimate preferences. Americans choose their jobs, and within economic constraints, their cars and the food they eat. In considerable measure, they choose their institutions of higher education. Why not the elementary and secondary schools to which they send their children as well? Educational choice, it might be said, is as American as choice among the brands of apple pie.

It is also as American as equal opportunity, proponents say. A privilege the rich have always enjoyed is partially extended to the poor. The kids of well-off families go to schools their parents choose. The families either select a school system by selecting a community in which to live or they look for private or parochial education. Those with more limited means live where they can. And their kids generally go to schools to which they have been assigned. At best, their choices are very limited. Would they like more choice? Polling data shows that a substantial majority would.[2] Advocates of educational choice can't promise to level the playing field. The rich will always have more options than the poor. But a well-designed choice program can partially close the gap, advocates contend.

The third argument for choice has attracted most attention. Most proponents (not all) promise that parental options will lead to good educational results. Market pressures will create better schools. The students will be in willing attendance, the parents will feel involved, the teachers will be free to shape the product to meet consumer demand. Academic performance will improve, they say.

What about the theory and what about the facts? This study attempts to answer these two questions and a third: What is to be done? Where should we go from here? A number of Massachusetts cities offer some degree of choice among their public schools. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the theory and practice of intradistrict public school choice. Chapter 2 takes a close look at the controlled choice plans that Massachusetts cities have adopted, while chapter 3 explores the notion that market pressures will make for better schools. Chapter 4 turns to the issue of interdistrict choice—plans that allow students to cross district lines in search of a public school that is right for them. Chapter 5 addresses the question of vouchers—choice that includes private and parochial options—and outlines a possible course of action for Massachusetts and other states.

The argument contained in these chapters is roughly as follows:

Chapter 2: Controlled Choice in Massachusetts. Choice in Massachusetts is much celebrated. Advocates like to tell tales of success and often relate the story of Cambridge and other Bay State cities.[3] The state has been at the cutting edge, they say. In fact, choice in the Commonwealth has primarily been a desegregation strategy. Racial balance—integration without tears—has been the aim of the plans in Cambridge, Lawrence, and elsewhere. And that aim, while perhaps inspired by a worthy end, has significantly compromised the commitment to choice.

The goal of racial balance inevitably clashes with the goals of choice. Racial and ethnic quotas have to limit parental options. A white family in Boston, for example, will only get the school it wants if that school has room for white children. Space limitations will always constrain choice, but the impact of that constraint is magnified when the racial makeup of the classroom must also be considered. Involuntary assignments and assignments to schools that are not among a family's top choices will be made.

It is difficult in Massachusetts to determine precisely how many assignments fall into either category, however. One reason is that families are indicating choices that reflect counseling provided by a school assignment officer. The state desegregation office urges the parent information centers to help families select "acceptable" schools; thus a black family will be urged to choose a school that still has room for African-American students. But the line between help and heavy-handed guidance—between information and pressure—is difficult to discern. And when choices have been guided, data are distorted, and unpopular and ineffective schools will fail to be highlighted.

Choice is compromised when families fail to get the schools they most want. And families will fail to get the schools they most want when classroom seats are reserved for students on the basis of race or ethnicity and pupils are turned away from schools as a consequence. The constraints on choice would be a price worth paying, if the ends of social justice were well served as a result. But in fact the commitment to racial balance confuses expanded educational opportunity with racial quotas. Involuntary assignments contract opportunities. Families who can afford to exercise true choice flee the system, leaving behind only those who lack the means to go elsewhere. The racial and social class segregation that residential patterns dictate is thus exacerbated. Minority children are left more isolated than ever and the schools are left without a critical mass of educationally committed middle-class families. They are politically, financially, and educationally weakened as a result.

The controls in controlled choice can and should be eliminated. Space permitting, parents should be able to send their children to a school of their choice. Those who wish to stay in the neighborhood should be able to do so. If they can be assured of getting their children into a neighborhood school, some middle-class parents will return to the public system. Increased parental involvement and political support for all city schools may, in turn, lead to financial support for the urban public school systems.

Information centers can help parents choose, but these centers should not be run by the school systems themselves. They should be independent offices or agencies, without a stake in the outcome. These centers should be responsible for evaluating the schools—for testing students and looking at attendance rates, disciplinary rules, student safety, and the like—and should make all findings available to parents.

Open enrollment would not run afoul of the law. Racially balanced schools are not legally necessary. Boston has been declared unitary for purposes of school assignments; it could return to a system of neighborhood schools. In cities such as Worcester, schools are not racially imbalanced, in violation of Massachusetts statutory law, as the state Office of Educational Equity now contends. Nor are minority students segregated, in violation of federal constitutional law.

Cities need not abandon their quest for racially integrated education. Good schools are the key; quality education systemwide will lead to integration. So will magnet schools that have as a priority a racially and ethnically balanced student body. But no seats in these schools should remain empty if certain groups fail to apply in sufficient numbers.

Chapter 3: Better Schools. Eliminating the controls for racial balance in cities with controlled choice plans is a first step in the right direction. True choice advocates, however, have a more radical program in mind. They want (for starters) choice in every community —open enrollment within every school district. The result, they hope, will be an educational market. Schools will be forced to compete; the best will thrive and the worst will die. Education will improve as a result, they say.

Controlled choice programs in Massachusetts have not created an educational market. But the theory itself may also be flawed. The promise of better schools is perhaps not the strongest argument for expanded choice among public schools. The market that choice advocates envision is unlikely to materialize as they hope. For one, many parents will not be well informed. Among those that are, a high percentage are unlikely to demand academically superior schooling. Choice advocates thus erroneously assume that popular schools will be quality schools; that is unlikely to be the case. Sound educational ideas and effective leadership, not consumer taste, are probably the key to good results.

In addition, a market will not necessarily create the small schools and educational diversity that choice proponents want. But the problem with American education is neither size nor sameness, but the lack of intellectual content. Too many classes in too many schools offer and demand too little.

Choice proponents argue that parents will show up at the schools they select. No evidence to date, however, suggests that passive, indifferent parents will become active participants in a school of choice. Nor does any evidence indicate that choice by itself will raise test scores.

Expanded public school choice is nevertheless the right idea. Involuntary assignments cannot be justified. Parents should be able to choose the public school that appeals to them. Choice serves rational public policy goals. It turns school assignments over to those who can judge the needs of particular children best—namely, their parents. It delivers a message of responsibility to those parents. It is likely to increase the level of satisfaction with the public schools, and thus to reinforce support for the school system. And finally, choice is a value in itself; individual liberty, personal dignity, and the opportunity to choose are inseparable.

Chapter 4: Interdistrict Choice. Public school choice advocates generally want more than open enrollment within the boundaries of existing school districts. They want states to insist that cities and towns open their school doors to students from other districts—space permitting. But the problems associated with open public school enrollment across district lines are large and the gains less than advocates suggest. One problem is space. Barring dramatically improved urban schools, the greatest demand for interdistrict transfers would come from inner-city families, and that demand would probably outstrip the supply of suburban classroom seats.

Of course, more seats would be available in suburban classrooms if suburban students could be enticed to sign up for city schools. But it is hard to imagine the day when any significant number of Belmont students, for example, would prefer a Boston school. Space in suburban schools might also expand if the schools could pick and choose among applicants and if the students who were accepted came with sufficient funds. Screening poses problems—but not insurmountable ones. Funding, transportation, and information problems, however, would all be harder to solve.

These and other difficulties would plague an interdistrict scheme. In addition, interdistrict choice is not likely to create much of a competitive market; it won't solve the problem of poor schools. At best, parents will show limited interest in such choice; most parents like to use the local schools. Moreover, among those parents who would take advantage of the interdistrict option, the majority would probably be motivated by nonacademic considerations.

In much of the state, then, interdistrict choice would not threaten existing schools. Certainly it would not force schools to offer better math or history courses in an effort to keep their clientele.

Nonetheless, interdistrict choice should be allowed. Some children belong in schools outside their home districts. Serious social problems, convenience, a special academic or other need—for whatever reason, students should be permitted to cross district lines in search of schools that suit them better.

By the eleventh and twelfth grades, in fact, their range of options should include some classes at a college or university—Minnesota's postsecondary options program has been very successful.[4]

Interdistrict choice should be initiated only after an inquiry into the experience of Metco students. The program has been in place almost twenty-five years and has never been properly evaluated. Before more students are put on more buses, the Metco record needs to be examined.

In addition, interdistrict choice may have to await a change in school funding. When students move across district lines, heavy reliance on local property taxes results in equity problems that are difficult to resolve.

Chapter 5: Vouchers. It is easy to argue for public school choice. Vouchers that would allow parents to spend public money for the private or parochial education of their choice are another matter. Hard questions are raised—some normative, some empirical. For instance, what will prevent the appearance of schools with questionable educational value that nevertheless satisfy some parents? Is the purpose of education only to meet the individual demands of parents? Or do schools serve social purposes as well? Will those purposes—education for democracy, for example—be well served in a system regulated by the market?

Voucher critics and proponents alike make strong arguments. Proponents point to strong evidence suggesting that parochial and private schools will do a better job educating disadvantaged inner-city youth; they also suggest that such schools will be more racially integrated than most urban public schools are today. They say that vouchers will save taxpayers' money; Catholic schools, in particular, spend comparatively little money for more education. They point to the inequity of choice for the rich but not for the poor. They promise schools free of the special constraints of a public bureaucracy. And they argue that choice is a value in itself.

Vouchers should be tried on a limited scale. We should test them with a pilot program financed with private funds. (Private funds would allow the program—a trial balloon—to skirt the constitutional issue.)

A five-year demonstration project involving experimental and control groups would provide much needed information. A pilot program would allow a bold and radical educational idea to be explored without resort to radical action. Further action would come only after some results were in and after policymakers knew something of what to expect.

In sum, the report has a dual aim. It attempts, first, to provide a framework within which the question of educational choice may be explored. Second, it contains a series of quite specific recommendations that, if implemented, would both expand parental options in Massachusetts and increase our knowledge of what might result if educational options were still further broadened.

CHAPTER TWO

Controlled Choice in Massachusetts

As Myron Lieberman properly reminds us, "'choice' *per se* is hardly more than a slogan"—it refers to such a variety of programs and proposals.[1] There is choice that is confined to public schools, and choice that embraces private or both private and parochial schools. There is choice confined to one school district and choice that allows students to move across district lines. And while some choice plans are relatively unregulated, others are highly controlled for purposes of racial balance.

The arguments that proponents make on behalf of educational options also vary. Crudely put, there are market and nonmarket rationales, and there are various combinations of the two. John E. Coons, professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley, for example, rests his case for choice on humanistic grounds. He suggests that the values of tolerance and civil loyalty will be furthered by a system that respects the preferences of the poor as well as those of the rich. (The rich can buy the education of their choice; the poor cannot.) He believes as well that choice would reinforce the American family by enhancing parental responsibility and authority. Most important, he says, is the link between the freedom to choose, on the one hand, and individual dignity and personal liberty, on the other. In other spheres of life, we recognize that link. Why not in education?[2]

The market rationale for choice takes quite a different form. Market proponents emphasize not closer families and more social tolerance, but the benefits of competition. Since the early 1960s the economist Milton Friedman has been arguing that choice would mean better and cheaper schools.[3] Schools that must lure customers will trim their costs and improve their product. Other market advocates have followed in

Friedman's footsteps; their theories are variations on his theme. These theorists believe that parental options—consumer power—will inevitably force schools to vie for customers. Every school will have to try harder, they say. And schools that try harder will want to differentiate their product; that is how a market works. Different schools will cater to different kids, and when the match is right academic performance will improve. When education becomes part of the parents' job, they begin to work at it; they'll show up more often at school and crack the whip more often at home. Competition between schools, a diversity of offerings, and greater parent involvement: it's a winning combination, advocates say. Test scores will rise, while dropout rates fall.

In their widely discussed 1990 volume urging, in effect, a voucher system, political scientists John Chubb and Terry Moe link the case for a market with findings on effective schools. Good schools, they argue, have in common such traits as clear goals, rigorous academic standards, order and discipline, and strong leadership. Private schools have these qualities. They succeed because they are autonomous—free from bureaucratic control. They are governed not by formal, hierarchical rule-bound institutions, but by their clientele: the families whose children attend them.[4]

Public schools, unlike private ones, are not in the business of pleasing parents and students alone, Chubb and Moe argue. Public schools must satisfy the larger public—in reality a variety of interest groups, each with its own agenda. The institutionalization of these agendas, bound up with differing notions of fairness, makes for bureaucracy. But bureaucratic control is at odds with the sort of school autonomy that effective education requires. Hence the only solution is to place education outside the democratic framework. Elected school boards, state boards of education, and other institutions of democratic control must be abolished. The general public must be kept at bay through the creation of a market system in which schools serve only those who choose to attend them.

Chubb and Moe propose the free use of public money for schools run by any interested group or organization. That "revolutionary reform" (their words) is a far cry from choice confined to public schools and highly regulated for purposes of racial balance. Choice in Massachusetts, in its current form, falls into the latter category. By the criteria that choice proponents suggest, how do Massachusetts plans measure up? And if they are not working as well as they should, is the problem the theory or its implementation?

First a description and then an evaluation.

A Description

In Massachusetts, choice has primarily been a means to create ethnically and racially balanced schools with minimal resort to forced busing—mandatory student assignments. In 1974, following a court order to implement busing in Springfield, the state legislature amended the 1965 Racial Imbalance Act, explicitly rejecting mandatory school assignments as a remedy for violations of *state* law. (However, a *federal* court could still order school districts to bus students to remedy a federal constitutional wrong, and court-ordered busing in Boston and Springfield was unaffected by the legislative act.)

The 1974 amendment did not entirely strip the state of its power to promote desegregation. Schools in which more than half the students were nonwhite remained obligated to take steps to reduce racial isolation. While the state board of education had lost a measure of its power, it could continue to require voluntary and involuntary remedies to promote racial balance. In particular, it was permitted to fund generously the adoption of desegregation strategies that relied not on coercion, but on voluntary transfers. Under Chapter 636 of the Racial Imbalance Act, the state could offer such incentives as transportation reimbursements, increased construction reimbursements, funding for magnet schools and for other quality improvement programs. The state's Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity (later called the Office of Educational Equity) was instructed to keep an eye on districts with racially identifiable schools and to monitor the disbursement of desegregation funds.

Choice came to Massachusetts as a revised desegregation strategy—a strategy necessitated by the change in the racial imbalance law. It did not rest on choice as a value in itself or on confidence in free market competition. It was therefore not primarily a means of educational reform (although many advocates undoubtedly did hope that it would result in better schools). The state slowly became an advocate of *controlled* choice—choice with controls for racial balance—because involuntary busing had been legislatively ruled out as a remedy for violations of state law and because the experience under federal law with mandatory busing had been so disastrous in Boston. Racially balanced schools remained the goal, but the means had to change. School districts would soon become enthusiasts, since the adoption of controlled choice, the now-favored method to desegregate schools, meant significant state funding. The interests of the state and the school districts thus converged on choice.

That's the general picture. Specifically, what do Massachusetts choice plans look like?

A Brief Overview [5]

Cambridge

Cambridge was the first city in Massachusetts to adopt a program of controlled choice and its program remains not only a model for other communities in the state but one with national import. Any discussion of controlled choice in the Commonwealth logically begins with Cambridge.

Cambridge constitutes one of the smallest urban school districts in the country: six square miles with a K-12 enrollment of under 8,000 students. Its student population is just about half white, half minority. Minorities are black (33 percent), Hispanic (14 percent) and Asian (7 percent).

Chapter 636 money went into the creation in the mid-1970s of four magnet schools in Cambridge. Each had special programs and drew students from the entire district. The hope was that these schools would further the goal of racial integration. But in a 1978 evaluation, the state found that the drain of pupils into the magnet schools had left neighborhood schools more racially identifiable than before. In that year the Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity insisted that Cambridge implement a plan that would meet the requirements for racial balance as spelled out in Fourteenth Amendment suits. These requirements were more stringent than those contained in the state's amended Racial Imbalance Act. The state believed that Cambridge was in violation of federal, as well as state, law.

Magnet schools were schools of choice, but in response to state pressure, Cambridge instituted controls over who could elect to attend them. Students could transfer from a neighborhood to a magnet school only if the move did not leave their neighborhood school more racially imbalanced than before.

That move was followed by a period when mandatory assignments were employed to further racial balance. Then in 1981, Cambridge instituted controlled choice. By the next year all elementary (K–8) neighborhood attendance districts had been abolished. Students could choose any school in the system, but no school was allowed to become racially imbalanced.

That system remains in place today. Registration is centralized; assignments for all schools are handled by one office. Applications from new students are accepted beginning in December for the next school year. There is a rolling admissions policy: at the end of each month a decision is made on the applications received that month. Every school, every grade and every program within a school has a white-to-minority ratio that reflects (within five percentage points) the Cambridge population. Within those constraints, to get into a school it helps to have siblings already there and to live in the neighborhood. Transportation considerations also play a part in the assignment process. Parents whose children are involuntarily assigned go on a waiting list for the schools of their choice. In general, the student assignment officer makes the final placement decisions, but there is a hardship appeals process that can go all the way to the school committee. Once

TABLE 2-1 Desegregation and Controlled Choice in Massachusetts

Demographics		Cambridge		Boston		Worcester		Fall River		Lawrence		Lowell	
Year		1981	1991	1981	1991	1981	1991	1981	1991	1981	1991	1981	1991
Total Pupils		8,276	7,639	60,918	57,321	22,005	21,066	13,445	12,500	8,197	10,725	12,427	13,500
Racial Composition (%)	White	63.2	46.8	32.4	21.5	83	64.2	97.0	[a]91.0	56.4	23.8	83.7	54.0
	Black	25.1	32.7	47.2	47.9	5.4	8.3	<3	3.0	2.6	2.4	2.7	2.9
	Hispanic	8.2	13.8	14.1	21.1	9.9	21.5		3.0	39.2	70.9	11.4	17.6
	Asian	3.3	6.6	5.9	9.0	1.4	5.6		3.0	1.6	2.8	2.1	25.5
	Am.Indian	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1		<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
% Free/reduced price lunch		41		—		43.2		60		69		76.8	

CHOICE AND DESEGREGATION (1991 data)

	Cambridge	Boston	Worcester	Fall River	Lawrence	Lowell
Magnet Schools	yes, 1972–78	yes, 1975–89	yes, since 1982	yes, since 1987 [b]	yes, 1979–82[c]	yes, 1980–87
Forced Busing	no	yes, 1975–89	no	no	yes, 1984–86	no
Controlled Choice	yes, since 1981	yes, since 1989 [d]	likely, in 1991[e]	yes, since 1987	yes, since 1988 [f]	yes, since 1987
Assignment	rolling	February, March, April [g]	N.A.	March, April, May	March-August (monthly)	March [h]
Gender Controls	no	no	no	no [i]	yes	no
Racial Controls	yes, ±5%	yes, ±10%	yes, ±15%	yes, ±10%	yes, ±10%	yes, ±10%
Sibling Preference	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Neighborhood Pref.	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Exam Schools	no	3	no	no	no	no
Under Court Supervision	no	no	no	no	no	no

[a] Includes Portuguese.

[b] The controlled choice program includes magnet schools.

[c] Lawrence had one magnet school.

[d] Controlled choice began in 1989–90, but only in grades K, 1 and 6.

[e] See text on Worcester.

[f] A very limited controlled choice program actually began in 1986 among a small number of Lawrence schools.

[g] Last year Boston's assignment process carried through until July.

[h] The lottery is currently only conducted for kindergarten students in March. The school then assigns the students to middle and high schools, but parents can request alternate assignments.

[i] No formal controls for gender are used, but administrators "eyeball" gender balance to ensure parity.

a student is assigned to a particular K–8 school, he or she is entitled to remain there until graduation.

The only students not subject to the regular assignment process are those requiring bilingual or special education. The Hispanic bilingual program is housed entirely in one school and the Portuguese program in another. Students who graduate from those programs are considered new and must apply to schools of their choice in the regular manner.

Boston

Controlled choice in Boston is relatively new. The school system contains approximately 57,000 pupils. From 1975 to 1989, school assignments were made in compliance with a federal-court-ordered desegregation plan that involved extensive mandatory busing—busing imposed as a remedy following a finding of intentional segregation in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The plan divided the city into some 800 *geocodes* (originally police reporting areas), each linked to an elementary, middle and high school. Almost all students residing in a particular tiny geocode went to one of the schools matched with that minuscule residential area. Those students were joined at that same school by others from other geocodes scattered throughout the city. The school a pupil attended might be near or far from his or her home; the system was designed to provide racial integration, not neighborhood cohesion.

Not all Boston students were involuntarily assigned on the basis of their residential geocode, however. Kindergarten children went to the neighborhood school. Parents could indicate a school preference. In addition, a limited number of magnet schools at every level drew students citywide. Three of the high school magnets (Boston Latin being the most famous) were long-established exam schools; entrance was competitively determined. Others were simply theme schools to which families throughout the city could apply. The number of such magnets was kept deliberately low, since they were viewed by the state and some education advocates as detrimental to the interests of the regular schools, which became (in the view of many) less desirable options.

Court-ordered busing created racially mixed schools in Boston but the mix came to include a disproportionately high number of minority students. The system in 1974 was roughly three-quarters white; by 1989 the white population had dropped to less than 25 percent, and in the neighborhood schools it was less than 20 percent. Equally important, the social class composition of the schools had changed; the black and white middle class had fled, in part as a consequence of busing.[6] And pupil performance had not improved. In 1987 the First Circuit Court of Appeals declared the system *unitary* with respect to student assignments; the schools, in other words, were desegregated to the extent practicable. Nevertheless, in February 1989, the Boston school committee adopted a controlled choice plan, which was subsequently approved by the state board of education.

Controlled choice began in Boston in September 1989 on a pilot basis: only pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, grades 1 and 6 were involved. The system expanded to other grades in 1990. The city is divided into three geographical zones for purposes of assignment to the elementary and middle schools; all high schools draw citywide. Families can choose an elementary or middle school within the zone in which they live, although assignments continue to be governed by a commitment to racial balance. Every school has become (in theory) a school of choice, but only for students living within its zone. Zones are a necessity in Boston; in such a large city, citywide choice for students at every grade level would be an administrative and transportation nightmare.

Worcester

Like Boston, Worcester has a large school system; over 21,000 children attend its 41 elementary schools, four middle schools (grades 7 and 8) and four high schools, and enrollment is rising. The rules are on the verge of changing, but at the moment children are entitled to go to their neighborhood school. They can choose not to, however. In

1982 Worcester introduced a magnet plan that now includes eleven elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools. These schools recruit students citywide.

Under a plan approved by the state in 1983, the ethnic balance in each school was to be kept at 60 percent white, 40 percent minority. In late 1989, the plan was revised to require that the schools reflect within 15 percentage points the racial composition of the city. (Minorities now make up 36 percent of the school population: 22 percent are Hispanic, 8 percent are black, and 6 percent are Asian.) Students could request a transfer to another neighborhood school, but white students could not move to a school that was more than 70 percent white, and minority students already assigned to predominantly white schools had to remain in one. In practice, this policy meant that almost all transfers were minority children from heavily minority schools.

The magnet program was Worcester's answer to the state's demand that schools be integrated. In 1983, Worcester had agreed that no school should be more than 40 percent minority, a goal that seemed realistic at the time. Five out of the 41 elementary schools were predominantly minority (greater than 50 percent minority), although only about 20 percent of the city's school population was nonwhite. A system that would draw students away from their neighborhood schools, it was thought, could certainly reduce the minority population in just five schools to the desired 40 percent level.

The plan was widely praised as a model for other voluntary integration efforts, and it seemed to have every chance of succeeding. No one anticipated what was ahead—a sharp rise in the number of minority students in the city. As a result of the influx, by 1989 the number of schools that were predominantly nonwhite had gone not down, but up—by one. That rise represented only a 20 percent increase in the number of predominantly minority schools during a period when the minority population increased by 65 percent. As the Worcester Municipal Research Bureau, an independent organization that conducts research on city issues, has pointed out, by one measure Worcester's magnet program had been a success. A high degree of voluntary movement within the system had kept the numbers relatively stable in the face of a rapidly expanding minority population.[7]

Worcester was proud of its system of voluntary integration, but the state was no longer impressed. In the fall of 1989 the state insisted that the city commit itself to a new plan—one that would guarantee *balanced* schools. Attendance patterns did not violate the state's racial imbalance law (since that act did not count white Hispanics as racially distinctive); nor was there any evidence of a constitutional violation, since the city had never intentionally segregated minority children. But the state had the power to withhold promised school construction money as well as other funds in support of the magnet program.

Worcester has now agreed to guarantee that its schools will reflect within 15 percentage points the ethnic makeup of the population. That guarantee means controls and ethnic balance—a controlled choice plan. After a two-year phase-in period, schools that are out of balance for two consecutive years will have to turn away certain students. The children of new residents in a district will only be admitted to their neighborhood or any other school if it has room for a member of the racial or ethnic group to which they belong. Parents will know, however, whether their neighborhood school will be able to take their children before they purchase a house.

Fall River

Fall River is the fifth largest city in Massachusetts and has a public school enrollment of over 12,000 students. The school system contains a small number of minority students by the customary definition: blacks, Hispanics and Asians together make up about 9 percent of the school population. But approximately 35 percent are Portuguese and, within the group, more than half have limited English. These are mostly recent arrivals—newcomers to a Portuguese community that dates back to the nineteenth century. While Portuguese are not usually considered nonwhite, for desegregation purposes the state has labelled them as such. That decision made the city eligible for Chapter 636 funds—which a majority on the school board were eager to receive.

Fall River, then, adopted controlled choice voluntarily. The city was under no legal obligation to alter the way it assigned students to schools. The state could not pressure it to do so. But the state's Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity could promise the community substantial funds if it adopted choice as a strategy to reduce the isolation of Portuguese students, more than half of whom were concentrated in one quarter of the elementary and middle schools. By adopting choice the school system became eligible for about $20 million in state desegregation money. That money could be used not only to implement the plan but also to upgrade buildings and construct new ones. An approved desegregation plan qualified the district for 90 percent funding of school facilities improvement, rather than the usual 75 percent.

Fall River initially planned a few magnet schools, but switched to a comprehensive choice plan, approved by the school committee, and then by the state board of education in February 1987. It created four, ethnically balanced attendance zones within which parents could make their choices. Within each zone there are several elementary schools but only one middle school. One high school, however, serves the entire city.

The plan was instituted gradually, starting in September 1987. As in other Massachusetts districts any student already enrolled in a Fall River school could stay put—a politically shrewd policy. Students new to the district—including all entering kindergarten—were registered through a centralized process that gave parents the opportunity to select the school of their choice within their geographical attendance zone. Provided seats were available, students with siblings in the chosen school were guaranteed placement. Students living in the neighborhood were also given preference. But the commitment to creating a racial and ethnic mix reflecting the city's makeup always took precedence over other considerations. The district was aiming for a population that was 35 percent minority, 65 percent white in each school, program, and grade—plus or minus 10 percent. *White* was defined, for these purposes, to exclude students of Portuguese ancestry.

This is the system that remains in place today. It is a controlled choice plan very similar to the one that governs school assignments in Cambridge.

Lawrence

Approximately 11,000 students attend Lawrence public schools, 71 percent of whom are Hispanic: Puerto Ricans, Dominican Republicans, and Cubans. (The city itself is under 50 percent Hispanic, but contains a large number of white residents who are elderly and have no children in the school system. This explains the disparity of 21 percentage points.) An additional 5 percent of Lawrence's students are Asian or black. There are some Portuguese, but in Lawrence (unlike Fall River) the Portuguese students are considered white. The school system is desperately poor and that fact shapes all programmatic planning.

Lawrence adopted a controlled choice plan in May 1988. The district is divided into two zones; within each zone schools are grouped into clusters of three, which together contain grades K-8. Parents are asked to choose a cluster and the expectation is that their children will stay within that cluster through the eighth grade. In theory, students are assigned on the basis of race or ethnicity, sibling preference, and proximity to school—in that order. In fact, severe space shortages—overcrowding in every school—mean that, except for kindergarten, parents are not likely to get the school of their choice unless they already have other children in that school. Choice in Lawrence has very limited meaning, but for a reason that is beyond the control of the school department.

Lowell

Lowell has over 13,000 students, 46 percent of whom are minority—mainly Cambodians. The Cambodians are recent arrivals whose numbers have been growing rapidly. In 1980, 22 Asian students attended Lowell public schools; today more than 3,000 or close to 25 percent of the student population are Cambodian. This past year 400 new students arrived in the district. Among the new arrivals, most are members of minority groups—seven out of every ten. Five out of those seven are Cambodian. The rest are Hispanic or black. The Lowell school system is about 18 percent Hispanic and 3 percent black.

The large influx of Asians has almost overwhelmed the school system. Space is at a premium; the school department has had to rent a great many modular classrooms in addition to space in parochial schools. Many of the new students have limited English.

Under considerable pressure from the state to come up with a more effective desegregation plan, Lowell adopted a controlled choice plan in June 1987. This was not its first attempt at reducing racial isolation. In the years 1980 to 1987, with the help of federal funds, Lowell developed seven magnet schools, two of which were citywide. These two schools recruited students from the entire city, maintained a racial mix of 60 percent white, 40 percent minority, and were organized around special themes—one a city micro-society school and the other a school for performing arts. The other five magnets were neighborhood schools that had space for students from other parts of the city. The two special citywide, K-8 magnets are still part of the system.

Magnets can be racially balanced, but they do not reduce the racial isolation of other schools in the district and, in the view of critics, they create two-tiered, inequitable education. The magnet schools often offer better instruction for better prepared (and more motivated) children. The neighborhood schools are then stripped of student and staff talent, the magnet critics charge. For this reason, the state objected to Lowell's magnet plan. When the city was threatened with court action by the state, a divided school committee agreed to substitute a system of controlled choice.

Lowell's controlled choice plan works more or less like all others. The city is divided into zones. Parents may pick a K-8 school within their zone or apply to one of the two unique citywide schools. (Special needs schools are also citywide.) No student is guaranteed a seat in a neighborhood school, although those already in the system have been grandfathered in. Any child currently in a school can stay there. In assigning students to a particular school, priority is given first to children who have siblings in the school and second to those who live in the neighborhood. If there is room for still more students, seats are distributed by lottery. Enrollment in each school is controlled to create a mix of racial and ethnic minorities that mirrors (within ten percentage points) their representation in the city.

Choice and Racial Balance: The Data

All choice in the Commonwealth has been of the controlled variety. Despite the controls, are parents choosing the schools their children attend? Are Massachusetts choice plans worthy of the name? And how well have the controls worked as a desegregation strategy? Has controlled choice created integrated schools, as promised?

It is clear that a system of controlled choice can create schools that have a specific racial and ethnic mix—particularly when the system is already highly integrated, as Boston's was after fifteen years of court-ordered busing. But controls for racial balance inevitably mean some assignments are either involuntary or to schools that are not a family's first choice. The particular schools that a black family prefers may have spaces only for white children—or vice versa.

The number of families who end up with assignments that disappoint them will vary from place to place. Some cities are more residentially integrated than others, and some have more schools with reputations for high quality. Most parents want their neighborhood school.[8] In a system of controlled choice neighborhood assignments are possible only when neighborhoods are racially and ethnically mixed. In cities where racial and ethnic groups are residentially clustered, white children must be bused to minority neighborhoods and minority children to white ones if schools are to be racially and ethnically balanced.

Such busing would pose no problem if parents did not care about proximity and if every school were of equally high quality. Neither is the case, however, in any Massachusetts city. Parents generally want their children close by and find only a small number of schools appealing. The list of schools to which they would freely choose to send their children is usually short. And an assignment (in the interest of racial balance) to a school not on that list is something less than voluntary.

The fact of such assignments—assignments that are either involuntary or to a school that is not a family's first choice—is not disputed by the state. Charles Glenn, the director of the Office of Educational Equity, has noted that in Boston "in order to meet the desegregation requirements...a substantial minority of assignments will not be to...first-choice schools." Parents, he says, must be encouraged to indicate even fifth-choice schools that they would find acceptable.[9]

The key questions then are, How many assignments are made that are either involuntary or to schools that are not the true choice of parents? How many are too many? At what point do controlled choice plans become too long on control and too short on choice?

First the question of involuntary assignments. The Massachusetts Department of Education has reported that in Boston the average percentage of such assignments for the 1990-91 school year as of July was 8 percent for the high schools, 12 percent for the middle schools, and 13 percent for the elementary schools. In some schools the reported figure is alarmingly high. Eighty-five percent of white students at Burke High School, 63 percent of all students at the Lewis middle school, and 71 percent of all students at Ellis elementary school were assigned involuntarily.[10] It is worth noting, too, that the high school averages for all students are lower in part because no students are involuntarily admitted to three out of the fifteen high schools. These schools selectively admit students on the basis of examination results and other evidence of academic promise.[11] Also, by September all of these figures would have been higher, since students applying for an assignment in late summer would have a very limited range of choices.

It is difficult to project how many fewer involuntary assignments would occur if the racial controls were lifted. Certainly some students would still not receive their preferred schools. But a freer assignment process, in the context of academically strong and safe community schools, would give almost all parents their first choice.

What about the assignments that are not quite involuntary yet do not honor the true choice of parents? The question can be turned around: What percentage of families are clearly receiving a school of choice? And among those who do not receive an assignment to their first choice school, what percentage end up with a school they want?

Neither question can be confidently answered. To begin with, the figures for clearly satisfied families may look better than they are. When a third, fourth or fifth first-round choice would be unacceptable to a family, that family (if it is sophisticated about the process) may list as its first choice a school that does not, in fact, top its list.[12] It is impossible to say how many families are actually indicating choices on the basis of such calculations.

The choices parents list are often the result of pressure, guidance or counseling on the part of assignment officers. As one parent testified at a Boston school committee meeting, families are being pushed to make a selection even when they have run out of satisfactory schools.[13] In addition, pupils disappointed in the first round are not assigned to any school; they are "given a chance to make a different selection" in a second round. Perhaps at both stages, certainly in the second round, the parent information staff is guiding parents through the process, encouraging families to apply only to certain schools.[14]

The guidance given to parents in the selection process is no secret. Massachusetts Department of Education literature refers to counseling and the need to develop strategies to persuade parents to choose currently unpopular schools. Many Boston children are left unassigned, one report states, "because their parents had not been counselled into including schools with available space among their selections."[15] A "First Year" report on Boston's controlled choice plan notes the "unacceptably high proportion" of disappointed applicants for sixth grade seats, and attributes the problem to "the failure or inability of the parent information staff to counsel parents away from choices which they should have known could not be honored."[16]

Other state literature makes the same point. One memo refers to the need for Boston's Madison Park High School, along with the zone parent information center, "to develop a strategy for presenting the benefits of vocational educational education to white students and their parents." That same memo suggests that the parent information staff should familiarize itself with the schools almost no one wants and with efforts to strengthen them "in order to counsel parents about what they offer." It also notes that "a priority for the parent information centers...should be to reach out to parents who do not receive their choices in the first round and help them to select acceptable schools in the second."[17]

It can be argued that the state is only urging its personnel to help parents. By the second round, encouraging families to select schools that are filled is pointless. But the line between help and guidance, between information and pressure, is often hard to discern—especially when the information comes from a state agency with a stake in the outcome. When choices have been guided, the data are distorted. The school a family lists as its third choice may be one that the parent information office urged it to select.

Such counseling on the part of parent information staff is particularly evident and important in cities such as Lawrence and Lowell where classroom space is very tight. A Lowell family signing up a child for kindergarten may have quite a bit of choice. But after kindergarten, parents have to take pretty much what they can get, given how overcrowded the schools are. A family that arrives with three children needing places in different grades will be lucky to find a school that can take all three. Parents fill out choice forms, but they are carefully guided in doing so. Told that only school X can accommodate their children—given the constraints of space and race—they will put down school X. It is not that the school authorities are running the system in bad faith; they simply have their hands tied because of the crowded conditions.[18]

In summary, children can be and are sent to schools their parents have listed as choices but that do not reflect their wishes. As a result, it is extremely difficult to count the number of involuntary assignments.

The Meaning of Choice

How many involuntary assignments are too many? At what point does choice become fatally compromised? This second question is equally hard to answer. A definitional dispute lies at the heart of the matter. What is an *involuntary* assignment? Or a quasi-involuntary assignment that cannot count as a true choice?

From one perspective, an involuntary assignment is an assignment to a school that the family has not chosen at any point in the procedure. A family that gets one of its choices—even a fifth choice in the second round—is sending its kids to a school of choice.

From another perspective, the family whose children are being sent to a school that the parents listed but do not want is not a satisfied customer. Suppose a family gets its fourth choice. That fourth choice may be perfectly acceptable, Charles Glenn has argued. It may be the equivalent of getting into a fourth-choice college such as Haverford instead of Swarthmore, Oberlin, or Rice.[19] No evidence, however, suggests that parents regard choices among Boston public schools as the equivalent of those excellent and basically interchangeable elite colleges. That perception would be at odds with reality.

Parents given a choice only in a second round of selections are even less likely, of course, to be satisfied customers.[20] With the help of the parent information staff, families will generally find places for their children in a second round. But when children have been sent to a school of last resort, they have been, in effect, involuntarily assigned.

This second perspective raises questions about the state's claim that the great majority of pupils in Boston get assigned to schools that are "at least acceptable (if not the first choice)."[21] Not all listed choices are "acceptable." It may be most accurate to treat only first-round, first-choice assignments as truly acceptable—clearly not involuntary.

From this perspective, choice is compromised when families fail to get the schools they most want. Choice means giving parents the right to choose the school that appeals to them. That definition is a far cry from the one the state works with. Charles Glenn would call choice compromised only when pupils of one race are denied seats and those seats are taken by pupils of another race who have been assigned to them involuntarily. Choice is compromised only when a student of one race has to give up his place to a student of another race who doesn't want to be there.[22] Clearly, that definition is too narrow. From my perspective, controls for race compromise choice when seats are reserved for students on the basis of their race or ethnicity, and pupils are turned away from a school as a consequence.

In Lexington and other communities in which families have a right to send their children to the neighborhood school but can choose a school across town if they prefer, all assignments are voluntary. Glenn describes these neighborhood assignments as involuntary, but no parent would ever view the matter as he does.[23] In Boston, in addition to a majority of white parents, half of all black and Hispanic parents support neighborhood assignments, a December 1990 survey revealed.[24]

Satisfied parents are those who can send their children to the school they truly want. True choice—this line of reasoning suggests—means giving parents their first choices. Only then will the families with the means to send their children to private and parochial schools choose the public system instead.

In Sum

There is too little choice in controlled choice, I have argued here. As a father in the system testified before the Boston school committee, controlled choice has been heavy on control and light on choice.[25] He referred only to Boston, but the point is clearly applicable to other cities as well.

Precisely how much choice parents have remains unclear, as the data are not reliable. It is evident that a substantial number of families are not getting the schools they most want—which may be the only important test. From a narrow, technical perspective, many families are choosing their schools. In reality, too often they are not choices arrived at freely.

The problem of excessive control in controlled choice plans is easily solved. School systems can give parents more freedom to select the schools of their choice. Specifically,

1. The process used to assign students by computer is easily modified to remove racial controls, and should be.[26]

2. School administrators in our cities should stop assuming a link between racial balance and educational quality, and the enormous effort expended on implementing controlled assignment schemes should be directed instead to improving the schools systemwide.

3. While concentrating on improvement in all schools, the urban school systems should restore neighborhood schools and the link between local school capacity and the number of children in the neighborhood.

4. In the longer term, when all city schools offer a basic, decent education, neighborhood assignments should be guaranteed to those who want them. Parents who wish to send their children to schools outside their neighborhood should have this option. Only by assuring parents that they will be able to send their child to the school in the neighborhood they have chosen to live will the middle class in large number return to the city school systems.

A plan that combines systemwide school improvement, open enrollment, and voluntarily attended magnets for purposes of racial integration, but that guarantees neighborhood assignments when desired, will satisfy almost all parents.[27] And satisfied parents who can choose among quality schools will bring others back into the system. Choice and quality—not coercion—is the best recipe for both racial and social class integration.

The magnet schools should set as a priority a racially and ethnically balanced student body. But in some magnet schools outside Massachusetts, classroom seats have been left unfilled when there were too few white applicants to meet racial quotas. Seats should not be left open for whites who do not want them. Minority students should not be denied a place in their neighborhood school on the theory that whites will never come if too many minority students are already there.

Magnet programs are often described as elitist. They cream the best and brightest from the regular schools, it is said. The solution to such creaming is better schools throughout the system. Parents who want good schools should not have to look far and wide to find them. In addition, elite schools may serve a particular clientele well. Boston's exam schools *are* elitist. Would the city be serving its students better if it forced the families with students in Boston Latin to either settle for a less demanding education or leave the system?

Magnet programs are also expensive. Creating quality schools that will attract students whose families have other choices, critics seem to say, is too costly. But money and quality are not necessarily linked.[28] Extensive research on effective schools has consistently failed to find a causal link between school spending and good schools. And if additional funding for magnet education is needed, the savings associated with true choice might provide it. With fewer involuntary assignments, transportation costs should go down, freeing up monies. And if the middle class were to return to public schools in Boston, the school system would benefit; more parents might mean more money.

Mandatory school assignments for purposes of racial balance are a bankrupt social policy. After years of busing, disadvantaged minority students in Boston and elsewhere have been left racially isolated; middle-class families, white and minority, have left the public system. In Boston a school that is only 7 percent white is now considered integrated. In other cities in the Commonwealth, the controls for racial balance only increase the tendency for whites and the middle class to leave the system. They are certainly a barrier to their return.[29]

The current system, with its limited choice for those in the public schools of Boston and elsewhere, exacerbates the class and racial segregation that residential patterns dictate. With few whites participating in the system, the insistence on racial balance results neither in integration in any meaningful sense nor in a significant mix of social classes. Choice is compromised with insufficient social gain.

Parent choice and middle-class enrollment are not the only casualties when the composition of a classroom is dictated by a system of racial and ethnic quotas. When schools paste racial and ethnic labels on all students, the lines of race and ethnicity further harden. Students are encouraged to think of themselves as white or Hispanic—not history buff or math whiz, athlete or scholar.

Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 promised more choice.[30] Choice is what the plaintiffs sought, not forced assignments. Choice is still what most parents seek today. A 1990 survey of Massachusetts families found that only 24 percent of families in the state opposed relaxing desegregation guidelines to give parents choice.[31] Across the nation, public support for racial quotas in the classroom is minimal. Whites have long been almost unanimous in their opposition.[32] Increasing numbers of blacks may be joining them. Wisconsin state representative A. Polly Williams, who fashioned the Milwaukee voucher plan, has broken with liberals on this question. "Racial balance has nothing to do with education," she has said. Liberals, she goes on, are worried "about busing African-American kids across town like pawns" when they should be concentrating on the "42 percent dropout rate."[33] Looking at that dropout rate, a growing number of black and other educators are contemplating the virtues of all-black schools—particularly for young black men. In Milwaukee and New York City such schools are already being set up.[34]

In Massachusetts achieving integration through the incentive of quality education throughout urban school systems will be politically difficult. The city of Worcester fought hard to maintain its reliance on a magnet program to reduce minority isolation. The state insisted on a guarantee that schools would be racially and ethnically balanced. Worcester stood to lose not only its state construction money but all its magnet funds if it held out.[35] The commitment to integration through coercion, when necessary, runs deep in the Commonwealth. It rests on a genuine belief in the wisdom of racially balanced schools as a paramount goal.

The Law

The state's willingness to forcibly integrate the schools may stem from a genuine commitment to racial balance, but relies on a reading of the law that suggests the state must desegregate the Commonwealth's urban classrooms. Racially and ethnically balanced classrooms, by this reading, are not a matter of discretionary public policy but of compliance with the law. Boston, for instance, could not institute a plan that combines guaranteed neighborhood assignments and open enrollment on a space-available basis; the system of reserved classroom seats for members of racial and ethnic groups is a legal obligation. Likewise by this reading, state and federal law demand that a city like Worcester institute classroom quotas if a magnet program that relies on voluntary transfers leaves some schools racially or ethnically identifiable. In sum, minority isolation is not legally permissible.

The application of this reading to Boston leads some to argue that, while busing has ended, the city's obligation to maintain racially balanced classrooms has not. Judge Garrity has closed the case but stands ready to assume control once again at the drop of a plaintiff's hat. Currently, the school system is out from under the court's supervision; any new plan that results in a rise of racially or ethnically identifiable schools will put the system back in court.

But, in fact, balanced classrooms are not required by law. The Supreme Court has never sanctioned remedies for such imbalance without a showing of racism—intentional segregation. That is the wrong against which there is constitutional protection. In 1987 the Boston system was declared unitary with respect to student assignments.[36] That portion of the case is closed and the reasoning in that and other decisions suggests that it cannot be reopened. In *Morgan v. Nucci* the First Circuit Court of Appeals not only found that Boston's schools had attained unitary status in student assignments, but stressed the importance of local school autonomy as a "vital national tradition."[37] Courts, it said, should not intervene in school affairs any longer than is strictly necessary.[38] And they have no reason to retain jurisdiction in a case unless racism ("discriminatory animus") taints the local decision-making process.[39] Where minorities have political power, racism will have limited impact, the court implied.[40] Of course there may be one-race or racially identifiable schools in the jurisdiction, but if they are the consequence not of purposeful discrimination but of "intractable demographic patterns," then judicial remedies are inappropriate.[41] Courts cannot solve all problems related to race.[42] "Perfect solutions may be unattainable in the context of the demographic, geographic and sociological complexities of modern urban communities."[43]

Boston plaintiffs inclined to reopen the argument would have no ground on which to stand and the Boston school committee, it seems clear, is free to design any school assignment policy that makes educational sense. Quotas in the schools are no longer required.

The opinion in *Morgan v. Nucci* is in keeping with two important U.S. Supreme Court decisions, one involving busing in Los Angeles and the other busing in Oklahoma City.[44] In the first case the Court in 1982 upheld an amendment to the California constitution that put a stop to all mandatory student assignments that were not part of a remedy in a federal constitutional case. In a federal constitutional suit, plaintiffs must show intentional segregation on the part of the school authorities; this intention could not be demonstrated in Los Angeles.

Can a state or a school district change its mind and decide busing was a mistake? Can it renege on its earlier commitment to racially and ethnically balanced schools? The U.S. Supreme Court's answer was an unequivocal yes, it can. Retreats are okay as long as federal constitutional rights are not violated (and such violations require a showing of purposefully discriminatory, i.e., *racist*, action). States, the Court said, cannot be regarded as irrevocably committed to policies that have proven unsuccessful or even harmful in practice. "Were we to hold that the mere repeal of race-related legislation is unconstitutional, we would limit seriously the authority of states to deal with the problems of our heterogeneous population."[45] The purposes of the Fourteenth Amendment are not furthered by desegregation strategies that do nothing positive for race relations.[46] And a decision to return to neighborhood schools can be both educationally sound and constitutionally valid.[47] "The benefits of neighborhood schooling are racially neutral."[48]

The Los Angeles decision has particular relevance for Boston. Mandatory student assignments for purposes of racial balance need not be a permanent commitment, the Court has said. Districts can have second thoughts—provided those thoughts are not racist. Even a revised policy that has an adverse impact on racial minorities would not in itself demonstrate a discriminatory intent.[49]

In the second decision, involving busing in Oklahoma City, the Supreme Court in 1991 again addressed the legitimacy of neighborhood assignments and upheld their validity.[50] The issue was a return to neighborhood schooling for grades K through 4. The constitutional command has been met, the Court held, if the school district has in good faith complied with desegregation orders and has eliminated, to the extent that is practical, all vestiges of past intentional segregation.[51] Desegregation decrees "are not intended to operate in perpetuity."[52] "From the very first, federal supervision of local school systems was intended as a *temporary* measure to remedy past discrimination."[53] "Local control over the education of children allows citizens to participate in decision making, and allows innovation so that school programs can fit local needs....Dissolving a desegregation decree after the local authorities have operated in compliance with it for a reasonable period of time properly recognizes that 'necessary concern for the important values of local control....'"[54] The trial court in the case had noted that residential segregation (and thus racially identifiable neighborhood schools) was not the consequence of intentionally discriminatory acts in the past but the result of "private decision making and economics," and the Court said nothing to disturb that finding.[55] Racially identifiable schools, in other words, are not necessarily "segregated"; residential concentrations of racial and ethnic groups can be the result of private, constitutionally valid, actions.

These Supreme Court decisions directly address the issues that would be raised by a Boston student assignment plan that gave parents real choice, and speak as well to questions that plans in other Massachusetts cities could pose. Most cities in the Commonwealth have had no history of court-imposed busing. No court, for instance, has found Lowell, Lawrence, or Worcester in violation of federal or state law. The question of an ongoing legal commitment does not even arise. And no court could have found these cities legally liable. By the state's own admission, Worcester's schools were never *racially* imbalanced; the state's 1965 racial imbalance law does not apply to Hispanics.[56] The city's purported obligation to balance its schools had to rest on federal constitutional law, which indeed the state invoked, pointing to a 1974 decision involving the city of Springfield.[57] That state court decision held that once a city has committed itself to a desegregation plan and has, for all intents and purposes, racially balanced the schools, any retreat from that commitment would amount to intentionally segregative action in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.[58] But the Worcester situation was different. In contrast to Springfield, the schools in Worcester had never been found to be racially imbalanced. The precedent doesn't apply. In addition, as I have suggested above, subsequent Supreme Court holdings have implicitly overruled that 1974 decision.

Had minority plaintiffs, with the encouragement and guidance of the state board of education, taken Worcester, Lawrence, or Lowell to federal court, the plaintiffs would almost certainly have lost. The state argued that Worcester in 1983 had committed itself to certain racial and ethnic proportions in the schools, and that settling for anything less would constitute purposeful discrimination. But both the Los Angeles and Oklahoma decisions undermine this contention. In adopting a voluntary desegregation plan, Worcester was in fact doing more than the Fourteenth Amendment requires; it could have scrapped that plan in its entirety *without violating federal law.* Moreover, the emphasis in both the Los Angeles and Oklahoma decisions on the legitimacy of neighborhood schools, the importance of local control and citizen decision making, and the role of private decisions in residential patterns (and by extension racially identifiable schools) all suggest that racially and ethnically balanced schools are not a legal obligation in Worcester and other controlled choice cities. Indeed, the involuntary assignments that are integral to controlled choice may violate the state's own 1974 law prohibiting forced busing.

In sum, racially balanced schools are not legally necessary. Are they educationally desirable? Should controls for racial balance continue to limit parental options? Or should Massachusetts let public school parents choose their children's schools? Will schools become academically better as a result of choice? These are the questions to which chapter 3 turns.

CHAPTER THREE

Better Schools

For those who stress the link between school choice and individual dignity and liberty, choice plans must meet one test: they must leave parents truly free to choose. For market proponents the questions are a bit different. Are schools competing for informed customers? Does product differentiation allow consumers to "buy" something that seems right for them? Are the schools that can't compete forced to change or close? Is education improving as a result? Are both parents and students becoming more involved and are test scores rising?

Most choice advocates in Massachusetts believe that controlled choice will both integrate schools and improve them. They are limited market proponents, in other words. The controls, they say, will ensure racial equity. The freedom to choose will create a market in which parents are sorting out the good from the bad, schools are responding to parent demand, and parents and students are happily working to bring scores up.

Is intradistrict controlled choice in Massachusetts, in fact, working as its advocates promise? And if not, is the market theory or its implementation the problem? Does the record in other states that have adopted public school choice plans shed light on the question?

Informed Parents

A properly functioning market requires informed consumers. The demand must be for a quality product. Otherwise the competition will be of no social benefit. In the case of education, parents must demand quality education if schools are to improve. They must have sufficient information to distinguish the worthwhile schools from the duds and they must define quality as academic excellence. If academically strong schools are not what parents want, then market pressures will not lead to better academic results.

Parents won't turn into educated consumers unless school districts make a major effort to educate them, choice proponents generally agree. Or rather, many parents won't. Information will reach some and not others. Middle-class parents will usually figure out how to work the system to their advantage. The educated and affluent are used to gathering information, drawing conclusions, and making their wishes known. They will come to meetings, read the literature, and bang the school doors down to get a peek inside. Those who are less educated and less well off are more likely to trust the schools to take proper care of their child and less likely to value education for its own sake.[1]

When parents do not come to the schools, school authorities have to find them, proponents argue. Parent information centers, run by the system itself, must engage in aggressive parent outreach. "Parent information centers empower minorities and the poor with information," the former Cambridge superintendent has said.[2] They solve the problem of class bias. At least that's the theory.

By this criterion, some Massachusetts controlled choice systems are better at informing parents than others. Lowell, for example, doesn't aggressively seek parents out, but tours of schools are offered and there is a designated visiting week. Lawrence hasn't done much in the way of parent outreach. There are no open houses at the Lawrence schools. Fall River established four parent information centers staffed by bilingual parents who provide counseling and arrange for school visits. Cambridge is nationally known for its parent information effort.

Cambridge became concerned early on that choice was working mainly for affluent whites and launched an aggressive outreach program. By now, each of the city's sixteen elementary schools has a parent liaison on half-time salary. In addition, there is a full-time staff at the parent information center at the Harrington School. Both sets of staff are paid with Chapter 636 money. The state picks up the tab.

The outreach program in Cambridge has evolved over time. At the outset, the staff didn't track down parents. But by 1984 parent liaisons and volunteers were telephoning and visiting the homes of all students who did not select a school during the first application period. (Cambridge has a rolling admissions process, so that those who apply early have the best chance of being admitted to the programs they want.) Brochures and letters now go out in a variety of languages. On certain days parents are invited to visit the school and the information center prepares the parents for these visits beforehand. The outreach staff also holds informational and counseling sessions in the evenings, so parents who work can attend. Members of the staff have even been known to offer rides and arrange for student baby-sitters.

The parent information center approaches parents both directly and indirectly. Letters and calls go out to the homes. In their effort to reach everyone, the staff also works through public and private day care centers, federal Head Start centers, public housing officials, and other community agencies serving school-age children.

Are proponents right to assume that aggressive outreach on the part of school systems will turn families into knowledgeable consumers? "We all have to be intelligent consumers, whether we are buying in a store or buying in a school," the former New Jersey state commissioner of education has said. "The parent has to be able to decide what is puffery and what is real."[3] Through school-run parent information centers, will parents get the difference?

It is unlikely—for four reasons. One, the wrong folks are doing the outreach. As the preceding discussion of controlled choice made clear, the school system is not necessarily on the parents' side; it has its own interests to protect, which the information it conveys is likely to reflect. In Massachusetts, parent information centers too often steer parents into those schools that have room for members of the racial or ethnic group to which they belong. Often those will be the schools with space precisely because they are regarded as problem institutions.

Two, aggressive outreach is not likely to solve satisfactorily the problem of class bias. In Massachusetts cities with controlled choice no parent can sign a youngster up for school without coming into a parent information center. But some staff members report that parents with limited income and education seem to have a hard time articulating priorities.[4] Low-income, inner-city families, particularly, have difficulty identifying what they want in part because, poorly educated themselves, they have not been taught to value education.[5]

In fact, as Nicholas Lemann points out in a review of Chubb and Moe, the greatest handicap suffered by low-achieving students is "their parents' impoverishment, poor education, lax discipline, and scant interest in education...." Isn't it a bit ridiculous, he asks, to assume that these same parents will become "tough, savvy, demanding education consumers" the instant they obtain the right to choose their children's school?[6] Regardless of how vigorous our effort to intervene, the average middle-class family will remain better equipped to make an informed choice.

The third point is related to the second. Many parents won't distinguish puffery from what is real because they will be satisfied with the former. Even many middle-class parents are not likely to make academic excellence their number one concern. As Myron Lieberman has said, "Only wishful thinking underlies the belief that parents' choices will normally be based upon teacher competence."[7]

While the National Science Foundation may be greatly concerned about academic performance, many parents aren't. Jefferson County, Colorado—the state's largest school district—has a choice program in place. Most parents who take advantage of the open enrollment option do so for reasons of convenience.[8] A research team sponsored by the RAND Corporation looked at both parochial and public secondary schools in New York City. Many of the parents of students in specially focused magnet schools, they found, were "less concerned about the specifics of a school's instructional focus than about a safe, disciplined environment for their children."[9]

Staff at parent information centers in Massachusetts confirm such findings. They report that parents, when asked what they're looking for in a school, say they want their children near them. Or all together in one school. Or on a bus by a certain hour so they can go to work. Or at a school near the day care center where they leave their other kids. Or where their children's friends are. Or (if it's the middle of the year) in any place as long as they can go today. Or at a school different from the one they've already tried. Or in any school that's in a safe, decent neighborhood.[10] These are all legitimate reasons for requesting particular schools, but they have nothing to do with course offerings or academic quality.

The small number of parents who do make academic performance their top priority can sometimes distinguish one school from another, particularly because academic performance is so highly correlated with social class. Parents who are academically ambitious for their children and who are test-score-oriented can select with some safety a school with students from affluent and highly educated families—if indeed such a school is an option. For the majority of parents who are looking for something else or whose choices do not include a well-heeled suburban system, most schools will be hard to tell apart. This is the fourth reason why information centers are unlikely to turn families into knowledgeable consumers. It is difficult to judge a school.

A good school is one that feels right to you, one Cambridge parent information staff member, tells families. She describes her job as "trying to get parents to think about what's important in their family life and how their children function." Some Cambridge families, she says, look at programs, "but most look at teaching styles and classroom environments."[11] She's encouraging parents, in other words, to consider qualities that cannot be easily described in a brochure and that do not fit most choice advocates' definition of an educational "mission."

But can parents get on to "teaching styles and classroom environments"? As one scholar has noted, schools are not quite like a grocery store in which products can be easily compared.[12] Frequently, available information is hard to decipher.

Take Worcester's quite elaborate "Guide to School Choice," for example.[13] What can the most highly educated parents learn from studying it? Not as much as one would hope. Every school appears to be committed to two things: recognizing diversity and using computers. Beyond that, the landscape is pretty hazy. Parents, reading between the lines, might get some impressions. Burncoat, for instance, emphasizes "basic skills." (Are these code words for remedial education?) Gage Street has a "life-skills" program: crafts, typing, etc. (Not for the college-bound student?) North High School, one of the magnets trying to attract white parents, boasts "a safe and positive learning environment that is highly successful when compared with schools of similar demographics." (Sounds like the school is safer than one might think.)

Decoding the phrases, parents who have the interest and patience to get through the brochure might draw a few conclusions about some schools. Would these conclusions be accurate? It's unlikely. Two years of Latin are offered at only one school: Burncoat Middle. North High, which emphasizes its safety despite its "demographics," does not have a particularly high minority enrollment. The extremes might be clear: a couple of schools for at-risk kids and a couple in which you can take subjects like advanced math. But everything in between would be a misleading blur. The brochure, in other words, is not much help. The problem is undoubtedly that principals were asked to describe schools that are basically alike. Their goals are similar if not identical—as they should be. They are governed by the same system, have similar available resources, and their professionals participate in common staff development programs. But even if the brochures were more illuminating, the limited literacy of many families would be a problem. Over 75 percent of the nation's adult poverty population was estimated in 1978 to have less than eighth grade reading skills, and that's probably a conservative figure.[14]

Of course families can visit schools. In Cambridge, for instance, visits (on special days) are encouraged. But, offered a tour, many parents turn the invitation down. And even among those who want to visit, many cannot leave work to do so. Here again is the problem of social class. The more educated and affluent the parents, the more likely they are to visit several schools, each for several hours.

How much do parents learn when they do visit? It is a rare public school that has a distinct flavor throughout, and visiting one or two classrooms on a special visiting day won't tell a parent much. Parents can look at a first grade in a school with three quite different first grade teachers; the teacher they observe may not be the one their child is assigned to and the others may not be to their liking at all. A teacher they see one year may not be there the next.[15] In any case, how many parents can judge the quality of a classroom they visit? Certain things may be apparent: the warmth of a particular teacher, the degree of disorder (creative or not), the apparent socioeconomic class of most students, and so forth. And it is on the basis of these impressions—and reputation—that many parents will pick a school.[16]

Other qualities might become more obvious and brochures and visits might be more meaningful if all schools were distinctive. That is what committed marketplace adherents hope for. They argue that a true market will force schools to become distinctive in order to attract a clientele. Toyota sells its product, after all, by emphasizing the special advantages of its cars—not by suggesting customers will get the same thing from a competing manufacturer. Market pressures in education will lead to product differentiation, advocates say. Schools will define themselves in special ways and then hire only those teachers that will fit in. At that point brochures and visits and parent information centers will truly be informative. Schools with clearly defined educational programs are desirable; the mistake is to assume these programs must be unique or distinctive, as choice advocates suggest. But Massachusetts schools are a long way from reaching that point. And for reasons discussed below, an educational marketplace is unlikely to create such defined schools.

It is, then, too optimistic to think that parents will make well-informed choices for quality schools, as market advocates contend. But poorly informed parents should still be entitled to choose. Parents should be free to buy bad cars and bad schools.

Competition

For many choice advocates competition is their theoretical centerpiece. Everything else revolves around it. The purpose of parent information, for instance, is simply to make the competitive system work as it should.

The theory applies basic economic wisdom to the educational sphere. Command economies don't work and markets do. As David T. Kearns, former chairman of the Xerox Corporation and designate deputy secretary of education, puts it, "Education is the only industry we have where if you do a good job, nothing good happens to you, and if you do a bad job, nothing bad happens to you."[17] Lewis J. Perlman of the Hudson Institute makes the same point. "In essence," he says, the "public school is America's collective farm. Innovation and productivity are lacking in American education for basically the same reasons they are scarce in Soviet agriculture: absence of competitive market forces."[18]

"Schools that compete for students, teachers, and dollars will, by virtue of the environment, make those changes that allow them to succeed," the National Governors' Association has promised.[19] Conversely, the theory goes, those that don't compete are unlikely to institute much beneficial reform. Why can't high quality principals or superintendents provide the leadership necessary to create excellent schools? "If we have to rely on the development of truly unusual leaders in order to save our schools," John Chubb argues, "our prospects simply aren't going to be very good. The current system is simply not set up to encourage that kind of leadership. A system of competition and choice, on the other hand, automatically provides the incentives for schools to do what is right."[20]

A competitive system properly understood is one in which good schools thrive and bad ones die. Those that have few customers, in other words, must be closed. One of the country's leading examples of intradistrict choice is the program in place in New York City's District 4 (East Harlem). In sixth grade every student must choose a school from among the twenty-one junior high schools in the district.

East Harlem has been willing to close and replace the schools that are not chosen. "If you don't get the kids, you are not doing the job....If you fail, you are gone," says John Falco, the former assistant district superintendent and current director of alternative schools for New York City.[21]

By the standard of school closings, the choice programs in Massachusetts don't measure up. Unpopular schools are not being shut down and popular schools are not being replicated to any significant degree. But Massachusetts controlled choice advocates argue that school closings are not necessary; exposure alone will do the trick. If the spotlight is put on failing schools, they argue, those schools will feel the heat. And schools identified as educationally wanting can get help from the central administration.[22] In some Massachusetts cities superintendents and other members of the school department work with the principals of the schools that the parents are not selecting. In Boston some classes have been added in the popular schools and others cut in the unpopular ones. In addition, eighteen schools have been designated STAR schools (Schools That Are Restructuring), and are the beneficiaries of technical assistance and extra funding.[23] But, in fact, not all educationally wanting schools are STAR recipients. In practice the superintendent and his staff have exercised discretion in designating STAR schools. Poor performance does not ensure that the school will be subject to STAR's interventions. As is characteristic of the administration's weak commitment to choice as a tool for school improvement (rather than for desegregation or educational equity), choice in Boston does not ensure that schools are accountable for their own performance.

Working with an unpopular school is not the same as shutting it down, particularly when the school knows it is guaranteed customers whether or not it shapes up. In many Massachusetts controlled choice cities, space is in short supply and every school is guaranteed a full house. With every school full, none will be closed. Half the students may have to be involuntarily assigned but the school will still be in business. Of course the districts could close unpopular schools over a summer and open them on a totally reorganized basis in the fall. But that would take money and energy that these hard-pressed school districts don't have. And in fact, the logistics of such a fast turnaround are very difficult.

In addition, choice won't usually tell a school district anything it doesn't already know about the quality of individual schools. A 1989 Mayor's advisory committee report on the Boston schools promised that, with choice, "it will soon be clear what schools are best meeting parents' needs—for quality, for programs, even for social services such as day care. It will also be clear...which need help."[24] In fact, before controlled choice was instituted, there was no mystery about which Boston schools needed drastic reform. Every Boston parent could identify the poor schools.

Finally, districts unwilling to close schools can wait a long time—perhaps indefinitely—for unpopular schools to feel sufficient heat to change. As Cambridge discovered when one very unpopular school showed little inclination to improve its popularity ratings, exposure alone doesn't do the trick. A poorly run school may actually experience relief in seeing the children of educationally aggressive families leave. Such demanding, complaining families are nothing but a nuisance to a tenured principal who has no interest in reform.[25]

Exposure alone is not likely to cause schools to shape up. But the more Darwinian system of competition that most choice advocates envision may not be the answer either. To begin with, good schools can end up losing out. Popularity and quality are two different questions. A school that doesn't get the kids is not doing the job, a spokesman from East Harlem argues. But some principals who resist popular pressure may be right to do so. The principal and teachers whose school wins no popularity contest may rightly feel that quality and popularity should not be confused. Chubb argues that a system of competition and choice "automatically provides the incentives for schools to do what is right."[26] But they may provide the incentive only to cater to mass taste.

The economic marketplace itself makes the point. The market may bring us twenty brands of soda pop, but they aren't necessarily all different and arguably they are all junk. "Freedom of choice," it is said, "would reward schools that meet the educational objectives of the families that select them and send a message to those schools that are bypassed."[27] But educational quality is a more complicated question than simply what the consumers want. The educational objectives of the families that select particular schools may be highly questionable. The public school monopoly protects schools that are "losers," Chester Finn has said.[28] But the marketplace can also create schools that, by the criteria of true educational quality, should be losers. Today, the bureaucrats and professionals may have too much power to set educational policy; tomorrow, we may want to insulate those in charge from the short-term pressures that parental choice can generate.

The point can be put another way. The most popular kid in the class is not necessarily the kid with any gifts that will count over the long haul. Politicians get elected on popularity; their election doesn't tell us much about their quality. The most popular schools can be educational duds.

Their popularity may be the consequence of either nothing more than good advertising or qualities that are attractive but dubious. Effective advertising can sell educational snake oil, Evans Clinchy notes.[29] Moreover, schools can be popular one year but not three years later. Or a school can be popular with only a small minority of parents and yet serve those families well. They may have unfashionable educational tastes but of a sort that the system should respect. In sum, consumer satisfaction is a necessary but insufficient indicator of school quality. Quality schools have to satisfy a clientele, but dreadful schools can have a constituency.

A Darwinian system of competition may not be the answer to school reform for another reason. Creating quality education may not be a matter of simply structuring a system of incentives. Good schools may be the product not of the market but of sound ideas. Education scholar David Cohen argues that fashioning good schools may require breaking with many families' values and pedagogical styles—not building upon them. Less urbanized, more religious Americans and those from the working or lower middle class, Cohen argues, may not have a pedagogical style upon which schools can build. They may not be intellectually adventurous. They are less likely to explain than simply to tell children what to do—less likely to question than to command.[30]

Cohen also argues that better education has to mean a shift in the blame for failure. As it is, it's the teachers' fault when students don't learn much. It's assumed the school must improve. That view, Cohen argues, drives schools towards a standard of success that almost all students can meet. "The convention that teachers are primarily responsible for students' learning...creates incentives for teachers to accept students' values, ideas, and ambitions. It pushes them toward definitions of knowledge and learning that will make it easy for many students to succeed." The result is that while students succeed by the established definition, in fact they fail. They are basically uneducated.

Cohen wants the sort of education that may be appropriate only for the potentially highly motivated students who, under proper guidance, will come to view academic subjects as "fields for intellectual adventure."[31] But his emphasis on greater student responsibility for learning squares with the findings of the RAND team that looked at educational effectiveness in New York City secondary schools. RAND recommended changes that are clearly appropriate to the majority of students, particularly those now floundering in inner-city public schools.

The RAND team distinguished between *focus* and *zone* schools. Catholic and special purpose magnet schools are *focused*; regular public schools are not. The focus schools, the team concluded, do a good job of educating low-income urban students not because they have shaped a product to meet consumer demand, but because they have a clear understanding of what good education is all about. These schools set high standards for both academic performance and personal behavior, and they expect students to assume responsibility for meeting those standards.[32] One of David Cohen's central insights is part of their formula for success.

The focus school formula has other components as well. These schools know that both firm rules and personal attention are necessary.

Teachers have no trouble asserting their authority. They act aggressively to mold student attitudes and values. The curriculum is rigorous and students must all take certain core subjects. Each school has a clear central mission or philosophy, although that mission need not be particularly distinctive or innovative.

Zone schools can become focus schools, the RAND team concluded, but parental choice should follow, not precede, the transformation. Reform doesn't originate with a market, but parental options are essential once schools have become independent organizations, each with a flavor of its own. That view, however, does not exclude the possibility of incentives for reform—incentives other than those generated by an educational marketplace. Incentives, Albert Shanker has argued, can help pull bad schools in good directions—once those good directions have been identified. Federally funded monetary rewards to schools for demonstrated student improvement over a three- or five-year period can serve to motivate a complacent staff, he says.[33] This would be competition of a different sort than choice advocates celebrate. Schools would compete not for customers but for prizes based on good teaching or educational improvement, relative to the school's starting point.

Diversity

A properly working competitive system, most choice advocates say, will result in a diversity of educational offerings. Markets create product differentiation. Schools that are forced to compete will have to offer different types of education. As a result school systems will improve. Quality education means different schools for different students. No single standardized form of schooling can educate all kids well.[34]

Schools can't respond to the market by differentiating their offerings unless they have the independence to do so, choice advocates say. Markets require both the free expression of demand and the freedom of suppliers to respond to that demand. Families must have the liberty to select their school, and schools must be free to offer something special—to tailor "their offerings to their clients in the same way businesses must, if they want to survive in a competitive environment."[35] Such schools have "missions."[36] Their distinctive identity attracts teachers with distinctive talents.[37]

If a good school system is one that contains a range of diverse educational offerings, then those in most controlled choice cities in Massachusetts do not measure up. Competition is limited and schools do not have much autonomy. In addition, controlled choice advocates are not enthusiastic about the specialized magnet schools that are the models for an educationally diverse system.

The bare beginnings of school autonomy are evident in Massachusetts. In Fall River in 1987 a process of partial decentralization began. Each school has been allowed "some flexibility for developing ways to improve the education of children." A "core of common curricular elements and skill development," however, "are part of each school's program."[38] Lawrence, under a superintendent who is a former principal, is also moving towards some degree of school-based management.

Of more significance, in May 1989 Boston school superintendent Laval Wilson and the Boston Teachers Union signed a three-year contract decentralizing school management that (after considerable delay) went into effect in June 1990. School site councils assumed responsibility for recruiting teachers, setting educational goals and managing the budget. In turn, schools will be held accountable for the performance of the students. An annual assessment will be made of the schools' success in meeting educational goals that they themselves formulate.

Over time, school-based management may bring a measure of educational diversity to Massachusetts schools. At the moment, however, no school system in the Commonwealth offers parents much in the way of distinct options. In no system do different schools have the distinct and coherent missions that choice advocates envision. Lawrence schools, for instance, are pretty much alike, although the superintendent wishes it were otherwise. Initially there were plans for an arts program in one school and a science program in another, but there hasn't been the energy to create such offerings. Overcrowded and underfunded, the Lawrence system is simply trying to survive. In Worcester as well schools have been basically indistinguishable—except perhaps for one. "We say they are different," one administrator remarked, "but they're not." At one time only one school had good computers; now all do. Only one had an all-day kindergarten; again, now all do. In Lowell, schools were told to work towards distinct programs, but nothing concrete emerged. In Cambridge and Boston, with their legacy of magnet schools, there is some educational diversity but almost no schools have a sense of mission that permeates every classroom, so that parents know precisely what their children will be getting in every grade and with every teacher.

Competition will result in educational diversity, most choice advocates argue. But does that diversity require competition among schools as a prior condition? American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker, among others, argues that it does not. For Shanker, the key to diversity is teacher empowerment; a range of options comes not with choice but with school-based management. His argument runs as follows: Schools are in bad shape; individual schools are going to have to think about what does and doesn't work; the only way they can test their ideas is to cut loose from central offices and take charge themselves. If they do, a diversity of schools will result—some better than others. School-based management creates diversity and diversity necessitates choice.[39]

Shanker would thus allow parents to choose among the schools that have been created through bureaucratic delegation. He would leave the basic structure intact, with power somewhat redistributed. The gap between what he envisions and what radical choice theorists want is large. In the view of Chubb and Moe, for instance, school-based management would be nothing more than a cosmetic change, since schools would remain subordinates in a democratic hierarchy.[40]

Diversity may not require competition and, contrary to choice theory, competition may not result in much educational variety. Both school-based management and choice advocates seem to assume that only the heavy hand of a centralized bureaucracy stops principals and teachers from creating imaginative, distinctive schools. That may not be the case. The hardest thing to do is to go into existing schools and tell them to become different and work together, Evans Clinchy reports.[41] Charles Glenn, director of the Office of Educational Equity, makes the same point. One wants maverick principals, he says, but most principals aren't mavericks. Creating distinctive schools requires energy and daring but, again, those aren't qualities that usually characterize principals.[42] A sizeable minority of principals, a 1988 U.S. Department of Education survey indicates, don't even want the authority that is the precondition of instituting imaginative new programs. Asked if they would want greater decision-making autonomy combined with accountability for results, more than one-third said no.[43] Portraits of teachers reveal an even less rosy picture. Adam Urbansky, president of the teachers union in Rochester, New York, has estimated that only a slight majority of the city's teachers are enthusiastic about the powers they acquired under the contract he negotiated. Most have been trained to go along with dictated policies, and many do not want the additional responsibility that comes with new authority.[44]

In East Harlem the innovative process was led from the top. "We needed strong direction from the center because we didn't have things to work with in the schools," a former superintendent has said. "We had to deal with the lack of leadership in the schools and burned-out staff." Seymour Fliegel, the charismatic former deputy superintendent, confirms the point. "Our problem," he has said, "was that we had principals who couldn't lead, and we couldn't get rid of them, so we had to find some way to circumvent them." East Harlem has a variety of schools, but not because the balance of power shifted away from the central office. The superintendent and his deputy led the revolution; they were the ones with the vision. They started small, enlisted interested teachers, found money, and watched the seeds they planted grow.[45] The old principals were shunted aside. The job of principal was redefined as something close to a building manager; a teacher was picked to be the educational leader.[46] The East Harlem experience has not been unique. As Nicholas Lemann reminds us, "The ghetto schools that are producing good results always seem to have a visionary involved—like James Comer in New Haven, or Marva Collins and George Clements in Chicago, or Joe Clark in Paterson, New Jersey...."[47]

Whether the inspiration comes from top or bottom, distinctive schools are not easy to create. To remake an existing school takes approximately four years, estimates the RAND team that studied New York City schools.[48] Of course it's easier when the staff can start from scratch, as it did in many buildings in East Harlem. Those newly reorganized East Harlem schools were small, and their small size probably helped to facilitate distinctiveness. Small groups can get together and agree on an educational mission more easily than large ones. Hofstra professor Mary Ann Raywid, a choice advocate, reports that most schools of choice are smaller than traditional schools, and their smaller size has meant an enhanced degree of collegiality among both students and staff.[49]

Small and distinctive schools clearly serve some students well. But are they right for everyone? Choice proponents argue (it's a favorite point) that not all children are alike, not all teachers teach alike, and the right sort of education for one child may be wrong for another. Children and schools should be able to sort themselves out so that they are properly matched. Is fine-tuned matchmaking between students and small, diverse schools such a good idea? Perhaps not, for several reasons.

One, the matchmakers are parents who may not be very good at it. Choice generally means parental choice, and parents can select a school for Johnny that Johnny hates from day one. He will say, my parents don't understand me. And for once he may be right. The right school for Johnny's parents might not be the right one for him.

Two, small (when it comes to schools) is not necessarily beautiful. Some of the highly successful focus schools that the RAND team studied were large, with as many as 2,600 students.[50] Quality depends on educational dimensions other than size.

Three, if educational diversity is what is wanted, it can be found in abundance within existing public schools. These schools, despite their inadequate academic rigor, do have a virtue, it can be argued. They allow unformed kids—kids pulled in a variety of directions—to experiment with different educational styles. And they allow under one roof the kind of sorting and matching that choice proponents advocate. Students can often find the education that suits them. The small and distinctively defined schools that marketplace fans want are frequently depicted as calm, loving, and supportive. But some students may find them parochial, stifling, and even alien.

The problem in American schools, in fact, is neither size nor sameness. The problem is the mishmash of educational rubbish they offer. The "shopping mall" high school is a disaster because the mall is a sprawl that contains almost no quality merchandise. Very little is worth purchasing. Students fill their schedules with courses that have no intellectual content and that demand almost nothing from them. As the RAND team points out, good schools have a sense of educational purpose; all students must learn certain skills and values. As mentioned earlier, these schools need not be distinctive or innovative. Students and staff in them need only to consider their own schools special.[51] The distinction is crucial. A school that is felt to be special by those who work and learn in it may be much the same as every other school, but will have the distinction of being *theirs*.

Choice advocates place too much emphasis on size and educational diversity. Choice among ties on a rack that are all blue is no choice at all, Sy Fliegel is fond of saying. But schools will never be precisely the same—especially those that are organizationally independent. At the classroom level there will always be educational diversity, since no two teachers are alike and their often intangible differences in personal style cannot be institutionalized. Differences between schools and between teachers within schools are inevitable. But these differences are not what makes for quality education, and good education is probably much the same in most every school.

Parental Involvement

Parents who choose a school for their kids will be making a commitment themselves, most choice advocates say. In turn that commitment will enhance the quality of the education offered. Is the theory right? If parents scrutinize schools, will they be drawn into them in other ways as well? Will they assume ongoing responsibility once they have chosen a school? What has been the Massachusetts record in this respect?

First, can schools function well without parents on board? "Given a choice in education," the National Governors' Association notes in a much-heralded report, *Time For Results*, "we believe parents will play a stronger role in our schools. Innovative programs will spring to life. Parents and the whole community will become more deeply involved in helping all their children learn. Teachers will be more challenged than ever."[52]

The National Governors' Association wants "parents and the whole community more deeply involved in the schools," but in fact Chubb and Moe, in their analysis of the data, found very little correlation between school effectiveness and direct parental involvement. What schools need, they suspect, is not more parents attending parent-teacher conferences but more interest in education at home—more behind-the-scenes support.[53] Their suspicion is supported by the findings of James S. Coleman and it squares with the complaints of teachers who say that the focus of educational reformers on curricular and other changes ignores the main problem: too many kids are disengaged and unmotivated, and too many parents don't care. Education is a no-show show. Where are the students? Where are the parents? one teacher has asked.[54] That teacher simply wants students and families to care—to put education on their list of life's priorities.

Unfortunately, no data suggest that, given a chance to choose a school, indifferent parents will either become active participants in school activities (as some choice advocates suggest) or that they will support the school's academic and other demands. With respect to direct participation, the evidence from East Harlem may be suggestive. "Extraordinary parental involvement resulting from enhanced educational choice offered to District 4 parents has not materialized," one study has concluded. "Parents are not extensively involved in District 4 beyond traditional parent-teacher interactions."[55] Distance is not the problem, as, for the most part, District 4 parents live in East Harlem, where the schools are located.

The limited parental involvement in District 4 might have been expected. As the RAND study reports, few inner-city parents "have the time or knowledge required to participate in their children's education. Even the parents who work to put their children into private or public magnet schools take a passive approach to education...."[56] Convincing parents to come to school is almost impossible.[57] These parents are not only choosing their children's schools but are often making financial sacrifices to do so. Yet they do not and cannot become actively involved in the school. "Parents support the school by choosing it for their children...but they are not partners in the educational process."[58] The RAND authors reported no evidence that these parents of focus school students were involved in their children's schooling.

We have no Massachusetts data that suggest the picture in the Commonwealth is any different than in New York. Before-and-after surveys would be required to properly assess the impact of choice. Findings ought to be controlled for social class as well. In all likelihood, middle-class parents will disproportionately visit classes, confer with teachers, and attend PTA meetings—whatever the school assignment process.[59] Thus, even without choice, Lexington parents are more likely than those in Lowell to keep a close watch on the local school.

The Lowell-Lexington difference suggests a serious flaw in the whole parental involvement argument. Christine Rossell has noted that much of the research fails to distinguish cause from effect. (Chubb and Moe's argument is an exception.) The literature tends to define a good school as one with high achievement—which almost invariably means a school serving an affluent clientele. Upon investigation it turns out that parents are highly involved in these high achievement schools. The success of the schools is traced in part to parent participation. Such reasoning is obviously flawed, Rossell contends.[60] Most likely, it is the relative affluence of the parents that accounts for both the academic success of the students and the high level of parent participation—as Chubb and Moe do suggest.

The involvement and satisfaction of parents already in the system is only one question. But can choice pull parents back into the public schools once they have left? And can it keep those families in the system who might otherwise be expected to leave?

In this regard, the preliminary data from Boston's first year of controlled choice do not look good. In two of the three zones overall applications, for both white and black children, declined from the previous year.[61] The record in Fall River and Cambridge, it is said, has been different; the proportion of school-age children in both cities attending the public schools has risen as a result of choice. But, the fact is that the more affluent families in Cambridge continue, by and large, to avoid the public schools. In addition, the Cambridge data have not been broken down by race; the white flight that occurred as a consequence of two years of mandatory assignments in the city may not have been reversed. Finally, Cambridge is arguably unique, for a variety of reasons, including its unusually small size, residential integration, and concentration of students and young faculty (with middle-class values but a working-class income), whose residential mobility creates considerable turnover in the schools and makes parent choices easier to satisfy.[62]

If those families in Boston and Cambridge who can afford private or parochial schools continue to stay clear of the public system, the cause may be too much control in the interest of racial balance. True choice might bring families back into the system. Mandatory assignments drive them out. Opposition to mandatory assignments cuts across racial and ethnic lines, Worcester and other survey data reveals. In Worcester a majority of white parents in a pre-controlled choice survey indicated that they would probably leave the public system if their children were involuntarily assigned to a 50 percent minority school in the center of the city.[63] Where there is choice and the choices of parents are honored, they stay. In 1984 Boston parents applying to magnet schools were surveyed. At the elementary level, 84 percent of white students who had received first-choice assignments the previous spring were still in the system in the fall. Among those who had not gotten their first choice only 66 percent remained. Black parents already in the system tended to remain there, whether or not their children got into the schools of their choice.[64]

The finding with respect to black parents is probably explained by income differences between white and black families; a relatively greater number of those who were white may have had the option of a private or parochial school. The disappointed black families too might have left the system if they could have afforded to do so. In any case, the Boston data, as limited as it is, underscore the cost of ignoring parental desires, or at least of ignoring the desires of those parents most attentive to school quality and wealthy enough to switch. They won't even be around to be involved in the schools if they are seen as consumers whose brand loyalty can be taken for granted. Many would rather switch than fight. Dissatisfied, they take their money and run.

Better Results

Most proponents—certainly not all—view choice as "a powerful reform tool"—a tool to improve the quality of education.[65] For these advocates, better quality has to mean, in the end, better school performance.

Better results mean better test scores and lower dropout rates.[66] Educators disagree on the usefulness of standardized tests as indicators of learning, but most (again, not all) agree that if only 2.6 percent of the nation's seventeen-year-old high school students can write a good persuasive letter, if only 12 percent can arrange a series of simple fractions in size order, and if only 32 percent know in which half century the Civil War occurred, something is very wrong.[67] And they know that if approximately 40 percent of Boston's seniors still cannot read at an 8.5 grade level (as determined by the Metropolitan Achievement Test) and about 40 percent continue to drop out between ninth and twelfth grade, the system can't be called a success.[68]

If choice doesn't change the performance and dropout picture, it may be defended as a good in and of itself but *not* as a powerful tool for educational reform.

What is the record of choice so far—in Massachusetts and elsewhere?

First, if the market theory is flawed, then the results in terms of improved student performance are not likely to be as proponents hope. And indeed no evidence to date suggests that choice has a dramatic impact on test scores. The East Harlem record is murky. After choice was instituted in the mid-1970s, test scores did go dramatically up. The district moved from number 32 among 32 New York districts to the middle range in academic performance. In 1973, only 16 percent of the students were reading at or above grade level; by 1987 the figure had jumped to almost 63 percent. (If newer norms are used, the figures for 1988 and 1989 are not so good—38 and 48 percent respectively.)[69] As a result, the number of students going on to competitive high schools went from just 10 in 1973 to more than 250 fourteen years later.[70]

Questions about the impact of choice on school performance in East Harlem have been raised. Choice may not explain the improved scores. Skeptics wonder why the two schools in the district with the highest reading scores are traditional elementary schools with students assigned on the basis of residence. They note that the schools that have received the most publicity draw more than half their students from middle-class neighborhoods outside the district. Some 1,500 students from outside the district have joined the students who live within it. (One principal has asserted that these students were aggressively recruited in order to raise test scores.[71]) What has been the impact of those 1,500 students? By the district's own admission, it is not clear.[72] We don't know who, among the enrolled students, actually takes the tests; are the low-achievers tested?[73] Finally, is the improved performance perhaps due not to choice itself, but to the small size of the newly created schools, teacher autonomy, and the district's extra funding? District 4's results are not unique to it. For example, District 13 in New York does not offer parents much choice, yet its efforts at reform have also resulted in dramatic improvements in student performance.[74] We cannot say with certainty that choice was responsible for District 4's improvements.

If the picture in East Harlem is cloudy, what about Massachusetts? For the most part, it is too early to evaluate the impact of choice plans on academic performance. Only Cambridge has had a controlled choice plan in place for more than two years, and a study by Cambridge school administrators suggests that choice has not improved the performance of students from poor families.[75] Michael Alves and Charles Willie, on the basis of skimpy data, argue that the record looks good. Their figures indicate that, by eighth grade, minority students and low-income students are outperforming whites in math and reading in 60 percent of the schools.[76] That doesn't tell us much. Too many questions remain unanswered.

For instance, what is the citywide median score for minority students compared to whites? And how do the minority scores break down along lines of race and ethnicity? Seven percent of the students are Asian. If, say, the difference between minorities and whites is two percentage points, that difference could be entirely accounted for by the success of Asian students from mostly highly educated families. Many of the Asians may be the children of M.I.T. professors and computer company executives. In other words, we need a breakdown of data into blacks, Asians, and other minorities. And we need some data on social class. Compared to Boston, a relatively high proportion of black families in Cambridge may be middle class. That is one set of questions, but there are others. If test scores have improved, is the source of the change the introduction of controlled choice, as some contend? Or has a restructuring of elementary and middle school education been responsible?[77] Educational improvement, as Myron Lieberman points out, is very difficult to assess. Scores may go up or down; in either case it is hard to say precisely why, as these examples suggest.[78]

Most choice proponents believe that students across the economic and academic spectrum will benefit from educational options. Relying on the market, they say, should improve public education for the middle class, the poor, those who are doing okay, and those who are not. It's an important promise, for the test of choice as a means to improve schools will ultimately be its impact on disadvantaged and failing students. Their fate in schools of choice will make or break choice as a strategy for educational reform.

In Sum

By the criteria market proponents use to size up choice plans, Massachusetts' controlled choice does not come off well. Centers run by school authorities are delivering inadequate information to parents. Schools are not really competing for students and so no reform-or-perish message is delivered. Nor do schools have distinct and coherent missions; they are not educationally diverse. Parents do not seem extraordinarily involved in Boston and other controlled choice schools. There is, at least as yet, no indication that private and parochial school families are rejoining the public system as a result of choice. Finally, there is no persuasive evidence that academic performance has improved as a consequence of the introduction of controlled choice.

The controls in controlled choice plans partially explain the limited impact of parental options in Massachusetts. But the limited impact may also be traced to problems with the theory itself. The marketplace is unlikely to work quite as choice proponents envision. The majority of families will not become knowledgeable consumers, insisting on academically superior and intellectually exciting education, for four reasons. One, if information centers are run by the school systems themselves, then the wrong folks will be providing the information. The experience of Massachusetts bears this out; the state has a stake in the outcome, and the counseling provided is therefore not disinterested. Two, even with aggressive information outreach, the problem of class bias will not be solved. Many low-income parents, themselves poorly educated and intimidated by the schools, can hardly be expected to become tough and savvy customers. Three, most parents will not make academic quality their top priority; they'll choose schools on other bases. And four, schools are hard to judge. Neither brochures nor visits are very helpful.

Informational problems are only one part of the picture. Competition among schools is not likely to produce the results choice advocates hope. Competition will identify the poorly functioning schools that no one wants, it is said. Exposure will persuade such schools to shape up. But exposure alone is not likely to do the trick. Nor will the threat of school closings necessarily force change for the better. Again, high quality schools may not survive popularity contests. More important, creating quality education may not be a matter simply of incentives. Sound ideas may make for good schools, not the forces of the market. Thus a RAND study argues that secondary schools that succeed with inner-city students share certain characteristics; they set high standards for both academic performance and personal behavior and expect students to assume responsibility for meeting those standards. Choice, the RAND team suggests, should follow educational reform, not precede it.[79]

Choice advocates hope that a properly working competitive system will lead to a diversity of educational offerings—a range of products to satisfy a range of customers. But educational diversity may not require competition, and competition may not produce much in the way of school variety. Leadership, not a market, may be the key to school definition. Moreover, whether leadership comes from the top or bottom, distinctive schools are hard to fashion. And variety will not necessarily mean that different pupils will be properly matched to different schools. Choice advocates seem to envision both distinctive and small schools, but small is not necessarily beautiful and diversity can often be found within existing large public schools. Neither size nor sameness is what is wrong with American schools; it is the third-rate education they generally offer. Schools will never be all precisely the same, but a range of offerings doesn't necessarily make for quality education. In fact, good education is probably much the same in most every school.

Parents who choose schools will be making a commitment too, most choice advocates say. No evidence, however, suggests that choice will increase parental involvement in schools. In fact, all evidence suggests that choice is unlikely to have the expected impact. The link made between school success and parental participation is also questionable. In affluent, successful school districts, parents may show up for PTA meetings but family background and a high level of commitment to education, not participation *per se*, account for the schools' success.

Finally, if the market theory is flawed, improved student performance is not likely to result as advocates hope. To date, there is no evidence that choice has had a dramatic effect on test scores.

Why Choice?

All this is not to say that more choice is a poor idea—that the notion is bankrupt. It is not. The claim that an educational marketplace is bound to improve schools is hard to sustain. School improvement is probably a separate question from choice and one that needs to be separately tackled. One set of reforms, however, does not preclude another. Parental options within the existing borders or established public school districts (choice across districts and vouchers are another matter) is both desirable and possible. These are some of the reasons:

◆ Families want choice. Parents want to choose a school that seems right to them. The public schools may offer basically the same courses and may be governed by similar rules, yet subtle and nonacademic qualities will distinguish one from another. For some parents, location will matter; one school will be more convenient than another. A family might like a particular principal or even the layout in a particular building. Choices need not be rational to make choice the right policy. Irrational choices—if made by the families themselves—satisfy parents.

◆ A system of voluntary assignments is rational public policy. School assignments are best made by those who can do the job best—namely parents. Choosing a school is more like choosing a spouse than a loaf of bread, critics of choice sometimes assert—a mistake has grave consequences. That may be true, but we don't let public authorities choose our spouses. Nor do we let only those citizens vote who will cast their ballots "correctly." The possibility of error is not an argument against choice.

Public bureaucrats are much more error-prone than private individuals when it comes to school assignments. Nothing in the track record of local districts suggests skill at matching student and school. In reality, the school system doesn't really try; where a pupil is assigned is mostly a matter of residential address. Since choices among schools must be made, better the parents than the school administration. They at least know their own children.

◆ Choice is also rational family policy. Parents have a job and education is part of it. To ask them to select a school is to treat them as responsible for the welfare of their children. The request delivers a socially worthwhile message.

◆ Choice serves the interests of both families and schools. Public school choice would give parents something almost all want: a chance to send their children to a neighborhood school.[80] That would make parents happy; it might also decrease school discipline problems. Schools with a base in the community become an extension of that community; the school is more likely to know the families and one family to know another, with the result that there is a sense of collective responsibility for the behavior of the children.[81]

◆ Choice strengthens schools in other respects. A public school system needs educationally committed families, as well as the political support and increased school spending that comes from parent satisfaction. A system that alienates parents drives away those who can afford to leave and who are educationally ambitious for their children. The schools then lose a valuable political and educational resource.

◆ Involuntary public school assignments are indefensible. There is no reason to withhold from parents the power to make school choices. "It is as close as one can come to a public-policy sin...," Chester Finn has written, "to confine a pupil against his and his parents' will in a wretched school that he would never willingly attend."[82] Even if the school is not, by any objective measure, "wretched," the point should hold. It may seem so to the student and his parents, and that is what counts.

◆ Involuntary assignments are indefensible for another reason. For some city services and institutions, monopolistic providers may be required—certain utilities and public transportation, for example. But there is no reason for one school to have an exclusive franchise. We don't assign citizens the public park their children can play in; a publicly licensed restaurant is open to every paying customer it has room to seat. What is special about the public schools?

Residents might want to limit access by giving assignment preference to families in the immediate neighborhood of a school. But if the school administration wishes to restrict choice, the burden should be on it to prove the legitimacy of its constraining rule. Parents should not have to prove their right of access to the schools for which they pay.

◆ Policy considerations aside, choice is a value in itself. The results—more parental involvement and better test scores—are secondary. Freedom involves the opportunity to choose. To the degree to which the society restricts choice, it is less free. Some restrictions are essential; the social order depends upon them. But, again, involuntary school assignments serve no higher purpose.

University of California law professor John E. Coons notes that individual dignity and personal freedom are inseparable from choice. "The permanent and central issue of the civil dialogue in a free society," he writes, "is how to maximize liberty. It is an intense—and not always a hands-off—enterprise....It is an enduring experiment not in laissez-faire but in [the] social implementation of private choice."[83] Choice, by conferring greater freedom, enhances personal dignity.

For all these reasons parents should be allowed to choose the public school of their hearts' desire at least within the city or town in which they live. No assignments, neighborhood or otherwise, should be involuntary. All communities should offer open enrollment, as they are required to do in Ohio, Washington and Colorado.[84] No restrictions other than space availability should be placed upon that choice. Controls for racial balance should be abandoned; they inevitably lead to school assignments that are in varying degrees involuntary, and, in the final analysis, undermine support for public education.

Parents should be free to choose, and free as well to accept or ignore information provided by disinterested evaluators about their options. Tests and other measures of quality should be performed by an independent office or agency. Parents should have access to statistics on test scores, attendance rates, violence and discipline, course-taking patterns, and students' subsequent careers.[85]

Choice should not be a substitute for other efforts at school reform; the nation's educational problems will not be solved by choice alone. But families, schools, and society will benefit from opening the doors of all public schools to those in the community who want to come.

CHAPTER FOUR

Interdistrict Choice

Public school choice comes in two flavors: *intra*district and *inter*district. Under the first type of plan, families can choose among the public schools within the district in which they live. Under the second, choice extends across district lines. Parents need not live in a community or pay tuition to use its public school system.

To date choice in Massachusetts has been almost all within school districts. The Metco (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) voluntary busing program is the one exception. The program sends Boston students to suburban schools at state expense. But Metco serves only a limited number of students, almost all of whom are black (whites are barred from participation). Other families would like to participate, the long waiting list indicates, yet the existing program is unlikely to expand. For one thing, it's expensive.[1] Why not extend the Metco principle (with a change in the funding arrangement) to permit freedom of movement across district lines for all students?

Other states are doing it. Students in every Minnesota community now have the option of applying to any school in the state; only space limitations and racial guidelines restrict movement. Other states—in full or in part—have followed Minnesota's lead. Iowa, Arkansas, Nebraska, Ohio, Idaho, and Utah have all passed interdistrict choice legislation; Washington and Colorado allow students to cross district lines on a more limited basis.[2] Across the country, interdistrict choice is on the march.

In Massachusetts these plans have not gone unnoticed. In July 1988, the state passed a bill introduced by Senate President William Bulger that would have allowed, on a pilot basis, both white and minority students in Boston and Worcester to transfer to suburban schools.

Governor Dukakis vetoed it, but requested a study by the state board of education on the basis of which new legislation could be enacted. A bill was filed in March 1989 but never got off the ground. Governor William Weld has since revived the issue by attaching a choice rider to his 1992 budget, with the Senate president's approval.

For some families, a school in a neighboring district makes most sense. That is certainly what Metco supporters believe. Surely what is good for Metco students in Boston is good for other minority and white students as well, in and out of the city.

Intradistrict and interdistrict choice plans differ significantly. For one thing, not all towns will necessarily participate in an interdistrict scheme, whereas in Cambridge, Lowell and other Massachusetts towns and cities that have adopted controlled choice all schools are schools of choice. Suburban communities can decide not to participate in the Metco program, as many have done; an interdistrict choice plan could allow the same right of refusal.[3] Parent participation is sometimes mandatory in intradistrict choice plans; in Massachusetts controlled choice cities, every parent must select a school at a centralized assignment office. Clearly parental participation would be voluntary in an interdistrict plan. For parents, say, in the town of Woburn, an out-of-district school would simply be an available option.

How many parents would take advantage of such an option? No one can say for sure. The majority of families would probably want to stick with a school in the community in which they live. The question is the size of the minority who would want another choice. In Minnesota, the state with the most experience, the number of families who are taking advantage of the opportunity to transfer is small. The state's plan was phased in and in the 1990-91 school year, only 5,940 of Minnesota's 756,000 public school students had decided to switch to a school in a district other than their own—less than 1 percent.[4]

The question choice proponents ask is not how many students transfer but whether more students will receive a good education when switching schools becomes an option.[5] Proponents point out that Minnesota schools have all remained unchanged. Public schools in the state are still governed by politics, not by the mechanisms of a market. If parents as consumers were to become sovereign, and if schools, as a result, were to become much more varied (these choice advocates suggest), there might be more interest in crossing district lines. Perhaps, but those are large ifs. A market need not result in greater diversity, the previous chapter argued. And most parents choose schools on bases other than the programs they offer.

With or without changes in school governance that would allow an educational market to flourish, Massachusetts might turn out to be a bit different than Minnesota. Urban discontent with public schools is running high in the Bay State; Metco has a long waiting list. That discontent should positively affect the demand for interdistrict transfers.

Can an interdistrict plan in Massachusetts meet, at a minimum, that demand? Will choice across district lines create the competitive market that choice advocates want?[6] In establishing such a plan, what are the problems likely to be, and how might they be met? And what can be learned from the experience of other states?

Space

Students can't move across district lines unless they have some place to go. And they won't move unless the available places are in schools that they find appealing or convenient. In thinking about interdistrict choice, the question of space (and where it is located) is fundamental.

Some districts have little or no space. Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, Worcester, Springfield and Holyoke all have severe space shortages. They have no room for outsiders and are not likely to, whether or not students can transfer out. Even if quite a few students were to request transfers out of the district and neighboring districts had room to spare, the schools in communities like Lawrence would still be overcrowded.

Of course if students were to leave in very large numbers, there would be space. But how many students from other districts would be eager to gain entrance into a school in Lawrence or Lowell, for instance? Like Boston, these urban school systems have an image problem. Charles Glenn, head of the Massachusetts state desegregation office, thinks it is possible to persuade suburban students that an urban school is superior. He suggests that city schools will be understood to have a great deal to offer "if the initial fears and assumptions about urban education" can be overcome.[7] In fact, it would be the exceptional urban school system that would attract a substantial number of suburban transfers. The traffic would most likely be almost all one way: from the city outward.

The evidence is abundant that this would be so. For example, Kansas City magnet schools are hurting for whites. A judge has ruled that whites should make up at least 40 percent of their enrollment, although the system is only 26 percent white. The rest have to come from the suburban and private schools and there have been almost no takers. As part of the attempt to lure white students, a Central High magnet school, costing $32 million, has been planned; its lavish features include a 50-meter swimming pool, racquetball courts, whirlpool baths and a computer for almost every student. But neither the promise of that school, nor an advertising campaign on radio and TV, nor the efforts of eleven full-time recruiters have succeeded in persuading white students to transfer. All told, as of August 1989 fewer than 150 white suburban and private school students had applied to one of the district's 47 magnet programs, while almost 3,000 places reserved for whites were left unfilled.[8]

Kansas City is not special; as *Newsweek* put it, "Given a choice, most white suburban parents will not voluntarily send their children into predominantly black neighborhoods."[9] St. Louis (with a school population of 45,000, 80 percent of it black) has linked up with sixteen mostly white suburbs in a metropolitan desegregation effort. Relying mostly on magnets with a black quota of 55 percent, the city initially hoped to attract at least 6,000 suburban students into its schools. By 1988, five years into the plan, only about 600 suburban students had enrolled in those urban schools, while more than 11,000 black urban students had enrolled in the suburbs.[10] In Little Rock, Arkansas, a federal court set the black percentage at 50 percent in the city's magnet schools, in the hope that suburban whites (knowing the schools would be half white) would enroll; the suburban whites never came.[11]

In any interdistrict plan few suburban families would be enthusiastic about a chance to send their children to an urban school. On the other hand, urban interest in suburban places would probably be high. Would the suburban schools want the urban students and how much space would there be for them?

A number of Massachusetts towns have experienced substantial declines in enrollment in recent years. Between 1972 and 1987, the public school population in the Commonwealth dropped by 32 percent. Framingham, Bedford, Natick, and Lexington are among the towns that lost large numbers of students. Some communities have been hit extraordinarily hard. In Dedham, enrollment has dropped by more than 50 percent during the last fifteen years.

Most of these towns have not been looking for more students. Avon is one exception. It has actually gone so far as to advertise for students. Certain programs can't be offered without a critical mass and a class that drops below a certain size is often intellectually impoverished, the district believes. Commuters from other communities (including Boston) now make up approximately 20 percent of Avon's high school. Avon is unusual but not unique. Lincoln decided that 20 percent of its student population (in all grades) should be Metco students. But other towns with declining enrollments have sent no signals that they have room to spare.

And indeed they don't—their enrollments declined but their space contracted. Avon worried that it could not offer quality education without more students; Lexington, in contrast, is a large town and had no such concern. With fewer students, it decided to run fewer schools. Extra space was there one day but gone the next.

Some communities might expand the room they have, however, given the right incentives. Will the towns with space or potential space actually want out-of-district transfers? What will determine their desire for students eager to escape city schools? Money and the process of selection will both be key factors.

Funding

No choice plan will be politically acceptable that requires substantial additional revenues. Yet few school systems will accept out-of-district students unless they pay their way—at a minimum. They certainly won't want students who will raise their costs. And they may demand something more. Without satisfactory funding, most school systems (if they have a choice) are simply going to bar out-of-district students. Or bar those students who can't come up with some money themselves.

What does it cost a school system to educate out-of-district students? The question is surprisingly hard to answer. In one community, new students will mean retaining or hiring teachers that would not otherwise be needed. In another, the schools will be able to absorb transfers without additional staff. The theoretical distinction is clear enough, but analyzing the capacity for absorption in an actual system is not as easy as it might seem.

Take the Canton, Massachusetts high school (four grades are easier to look at than twelve).[12] In 1982 the school had 1,250 students; by 1989 it was down to 699 and enrollment was still dropping. Some teachers had been let go, but there was still room for additional students. How many could be added in the 1988-89 school year before another teacher would have to be hired?

The answer would depend on the room in each class, course, and course section. For instance, in theory forty students could be added to the ninth grade, but if all forty were prepared to do advanced placement (AP) work in English, they could not be absorbed. There might not be room for a single additional gifted student of English; all the space might be in lower level courses.

The AP problem would not be unique. If the distribution of applicants did not match the distribution of space across sections—honors, college, and general—the school could not accept them. But it would be hard to know beforehand where a student would belong. In addition, English is only one subject. Suppose a transfer student were lousy in English but superb in math, and could be properly placed in only one of the subjects. Would that be a student whom the school could not accept without raising its costs? And what about the problem of space one year but not the next? The community might experience an influx of families with older children, coming into the higher grades. The students who seemed to require no additional staff at the outset would then become an expense down the road.

A school district may be able to add some number of students without substantially increasing its costs—without having to hire or retain teachers that it would not otherwise need. But the number at which it arrives may be quite imprecise. Another district may want more students even if they're not free. The expense may be a secondary consideration. Avon, which has eagerly sought transfers, charges parents an amount—$1,500—that reflects a calculation as to what the market will bear, rather than what the cost is to the district.[13]

In any interdistrict plan, towns like Avon would surely be the exception. Most would want (at the very least) their expenses covered. In calculating the incremental instructional cost of adding 88 students (the 1990-91 number) to a Lincoln school, the town looks at the number of resident students in the school, the student/staff ratio, the number of Metco students who can be served by existing school personnel, and the need for and average salary of additional personnel. This is what, in theory, the state pays, in addition to the salaries of the local Metco staff, the cost of transporting the students, and serving those with special needs.

In fact, since the state is short on funds, the receiving towns foot a substantial part of the Metco bill. Transportation is fully covered, but other costs are not. A school committee task force in Lincoln calculated the total incremental cost for the 88 students at $340,000—not counting transportation or Metco administration costs, which are covered by the state. The town was reimbursed for $93,000. That left $247,000 (approximately $2,800 per pupil) as a town expense.[14]

With its transportation and other costs, Metco is an expensive program, in part because it contains some educational "extras," some discretionary but some not. Take transportation, for example. If 120 Metco students travel to Wayland every day, a certain number of buses are necessary. Within limits, the number of students could change and the cost of transportation would remain the same. But Metco students are rightly encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities, which may mean extra trips, scheduled later than the regular buses.

Metco students are also provided with special support staff. Wayland employs a Metco director, an assistant director, four academic specialists, a community liaison, a part-time secretary, and three part-time bus monitors. Other towns have made similar commitments in the belief that these students need some extra attention. In addition, a disproportionately high number of Metco students have special needs. In Wayland, 15 percent of town residents, but over 25 percent of Metco students, require special education, a program for children with special needs, including the physically, emotionally, and learning disabled. In Lincoln, Metco students are 20 percent of the school population, but they absorb 47 percent of special needs and remedial instruction costs.[15] The town also calculates that these students take up a disproportionate amount of classroom teachers' time.[16]

The Metco program works in Massachusetts because participating suburban schools believe in the value of the program. That commitment has been a bit of luck that might not extend to an expanded interdistrict plan. As Albert Shanker has pointed out, a receiving district might not be satisfied with an arrangement that covers the district's additional costs. Requiring students who wish to transfer to simply pay their way won't necessarily suffice. "Why should any district want to attract more students if these students bring with them, at most, only the money it will cost to educate them?" he has asked.[17] And, indeed, a spokesman for one Boston area suburban school, when asked about the town's receptiveness to students from other towns, indicated that the level of interest would be very low without obvious benefits for the school system. If the incoming students brought with them funds that not only covered their costs but could be used to enrich the school's programs, or if additional funds meant that an extra teacher could be retained, then the town would welcome the newcomers. Otherwise, more students would just mean additional, unnecessary headaches, especially when parents would not be immediately available in the event of a missed bus or some other crisis.[18]

Wisconsin has instituted interdistrict choice as part of a consent decree in a greater Milwaukee desegregation case, and in calculating the cost of moving urban students into suburban schools, the state assumed the necessity of incentive money. The state became convinced that the suburban schools were not going to be receptive without a reward. Thus, Wisconsin pays suburban communities far more than the marginal cost of educating Milwaukee students. In addition, those communities that accept minority students in excess of 5 percent of their own resident population get a bonus.[19]

Interdistrict choice, like intradistrict plans, can create new expenses. Intradistrict plans add to education costs. Cambridge, with 8,000 students, spends $1.4 million—or $175 per pupil—in state and local dollars to pay for transportation and parent outreach.[20] In Lawrence, the parent information center employs fifteen people at a cost of about $400,000 a year ($40 per pupil).[21] In Lowell the annual cost of running the information center (with a full-time staff of seven) and busing students is estimated to be around $2.5 million.[22] In interdistrict plans, the cost of both informing parents about schools in other communities and transporting students increases with distance.[23]

Any interdistrict program includes state administrative costs. And, if participating districts forge distinctive programs, costs will increase. As with intradistrict choice and magnet schools, both program development costs and expenses are tied to the use of distinctive materials for distinctive programs. "It costs more per student to operate a magnet school than it does a regular school, and that is a fact," the director of desegregation monitoring in St. Louis has noted.[24] It is not a fact that anyone disputes. In District 4 (East Harlem) in New York, the innovative education that was offered as part of the choice plan was expensive. Smaller classes meant additional teachers and new programs demanded new materials and equipment. At one point the district received more federal funding per pupil than any other district in the nation.[25]

Where Will the Money Come From?

Whatever the amount, where is the money to pay host districts going to come from? The question points to a dilemma: without additional funding, dollars already allocated to education will have to follow the child. But under current conditions, any plan that transfers either state money or a combination of state and local money from one district to another is likely to hurt the students left behind and to have a racially disparate impact. Harvard professor of education Charles Willie puts the point succinctly. Transferring funds from one school to another, he says, "doesn't do anything for the schools or systems that are left behind."[26] Those schools are left less able to provide quality education, and they will often be the schools that minority children attend.

The problem is most obvious with respect to Boston—although certainly not confined to that city. Barring a radical improvement in the quality of Boston schools, more students are likely to transfer out of the system than into it. If students transferring to a suburban school take the state's contribution to their education with them, Boston schools will suffer financially; if they take both the state and local contributions, the loss will be that much greater. Boston schools are overwhelmingly black and Hispanic; any reduction in funds available to the school system will disproportionately hit minority students. The consequence will be a political, legal and moral mess.

It might be argued that with fewer students, the system will require proportionately less money. In fact, it won't work that way, as the discussion of marginal costs indicated. If the Boston school population drops by 10 percent, the system will not be 10 percent less expensive to run. Precisely how much it would save is in part dictated by political and educational considerations: school districts can lose students but want to retain teachers and schools.[27] Savings will also be dictated by the size and distribution of the decline in enrollments. The question of savings is the other side of the marginal expense coin. Peterson, Minnesota, a small school district, reports that every ten students lost can mean a loss in state education dollars equal to the salary of one teacher, even though that teacher has served more than the ten departing students. Each student left behind must do with less.[28]

There is another point. The Boston public school population has dropped from 85,000 to 57,000 since 1974. If that already drastically reduced population were to shrink further as a consequence of interdistrict choice, the financial threat to the system might be magnified by the loss of political support that would accompany the drain of students. The smaller the proportion of the city's families making use of its public schools, the weaker the political support for educational appropriations. The potential cost to the city of increased, publicly subsidized flight to the suburbs is therefore hard to measure precisely.

The Metco program relies on an extraordinary solution to the problem of allowing choice to impoverish a largely minority system. The state pays both the city of Boston and the suburban system for the students involved, in effect buying their freedom from Boston. In its metropolitan Milwaukee desegregation plan, Wisconsin does the same thing. When a Milwaukee student transfers to a suburban district, the city still receives the state aid for which it would be eligible if that student remained one of its own. The state pays twice for each transferring student.[29]

Massachusetts and Wisconsin are protecting inner-city, largely minority schools from the loss of funds that occurs when students leave a system. These states are insulating themselves against the charge that their desegregation plans leave significant numbers of minority students worse off. In Wisconsin, however, the solution is under attack.

Leaving aside racial considerations—the disparate impact of interdistrict choice on minority low-income students—the transfer of state aid would create problems. Take the examples of Andover and Lawrence. If Andover accepts any students from Lawrence, the number is not likely to be large. Most Lawrence students will have to attend Lawrence schools. That school system is already financially starved, in part because the town uses for other purposes some of the local aid that is supposed to help the schools. The school system, as a result, can't afford to lose another cent. A drop in revenue would penalize students who have no other place to go. Choice plans have an egalitarian appeal: they promise to extend to the poor a privilege the rich have always enjoyed—that of selecting a school system. But if choice means the further impoverishment of already desperate school systems, then it is precisely the kids of poor parents who will suffer the most.

Many choice advocates dismiss the problems that result from taking from those who already have the least. They argue that market systems generally serve the public interest well and in a market economy products that don't measure up (by the standard of consumer preference) disappear. If the demand for Apple computers drastically drops, the company will fold. Why shouldn't schools, as well, be disciplined by the market? If parents want out of a system, then the system is not meeting their demands. If it wants the revenues attached to those parents, it should shape up.

School systems, however, are not quite like computer companies. The Lawrence school system can't go out of business; most of its students would have nowhere else to go. And even if they did, most parents want the local schools to educate their children.

In addition, while GM may be losing out to the competition because it's not making good enough cars, the problem in Lawrence would not necessarily be educational incompetence. If Lawrence schools were to lose students and could not attract others to replace them, the reasons might be the social class of the majority of students in the city and the level of educational spending. Poor schools are not in a position to attract students from high-spending suburban districts.[30] What's the difference between Andover and Lawrence? The wealth of the community. Andover schools benefit from the town's high property values and from its affluent, educated residents—the two go hand in hand.

The point can be put another way. In terms of SAT scores and the like, the Andover public school system beats the Lawrence system by a mile. But if the Andover school system were to take over the Lawrence schools, or if teachers and administrators in the two communities were to trade places, the result would not be a rapid improvement in the educational performance of Lawrence students. At least, such improvement is very unlikely. The affluent suburban school systems around Boston to which Metco students are bused have not done as well as expected with that inner-city population. Those systems do not dispense educational magic; they have no educational secrets known only to them. Arguably, they are *less* equipped to deal with the students who bring a host of social ills to the schools and are already woefully behind in reading by the early grades. T.C. Williams High School (in Alexandria, Virginia), described by Patrick Welsh in *Tales Out of School,* was extremely successful with its students from the middle class, but it did miserably with low-income children.[31]

In other words, Boston and Lawrence schools, among others, may be failing their kids while providing education that is basically the same as that offered in successful districts like Lexington and Andover. Again, if GM can't manufacture a decent product, then it deserves to lose its customers. But the urban school systems with their high dropout rates, their large number of students from homeless or AFDC families, their drug and crime problems—the host of problems that society has dumped at their doorstop—may not be analogous to a poorly run business that has brought its troubles upon itself.

Proposed Solutions

We have come full circle. Schools won't take students unless they pay their way; taxpayers aren't going to want to foot the bill for higher educational costs. But having too many dollars follow the child may have an unacceptable educational impact on the poorest school districts students leave. Is there a solution? What has been proposed so far?

Governor Weld's current proposal contains no details. The interdistrict choice legislation that was filed by Massachusetts Senate President William Bulger in March 1989 would have stopped state aid to the home district when a student chose to transfer, but only after a transitional year. This is how it worked: The Commonwealth would pay to the receiving district, from funds appropriated for that purpose,

$2,000 for each participating student in a regular day program. That $2,000 would substitute for local aid (the state's expected per pupil contribution to the school system). The home district lost not $2,000 but—after the first year—the local aid attached to the students who had chosen to leave. That per pupil amount could be considerably less than $2,000—depending on the state formula for that particular community.[32]

The state's draft legislation was quite different from what Senator Bulger had initially envisioned. His original plan was simple: The state would pay the transferring student's entire tuition and the total amount would be subtracted from the state's aid to the home district. If a student transferred from Boston to Lexington and Lexington's tuition was $4,500, the entire $4,500 would be subtracted from Boston's state aid package—even though the city received less than $900 in state aid for each of its pupils. For every Boston student who stayed in the system, the state would kick in approximately $900, but for every Boston student who left for Lexington, the city would lose $4,500. Indirectly, then, Boston would be footing over three-fourths of the tuition charge. Some other towns get considerably more from the state and their share of the tuition charge would be correspondingly less.[33]

Senator Bulger's plan was his alone. In beginning to work on a legislative proposal for the department of education, Charles Glenn rejected the notion that the school district a student chose to leave should be forced to use local property tax revenues to finance the transfer. His first proposal was to shift the state aid attached to the transferring student from the home to the receiving district and supplement that state aid with $800. But that formula had a problem: urban areas get more state aid than suburban towns. The student transferring from Boston to Belmont would bring more money than the student transferring from Belmont to Boston. The Boston school system would therefore be disadvantaged relative to its suburban neighbors. One contemplated solution was to take the higher figure and supplement that with the $800. If per pupil state aid to Boston were more than that received by Belmont, the Boston figure would be used in calculating the amount paid when students transferred either way between Boston and Belmont.

In time, this formula too was rejected and an arbitrary amount of $2,000 (to be paid by the state) was substituted. That figure solved another problem: payments would be approximately the same as those made under the Metco program, encouraging suburban schools to maintain their Metco commitment. Metco involves only minority students; an interdistrict choice plan would open the doors to whites as well. Were school districts to drop the one in favor of the other, then seats in suburban classrooms that had been reserved primarily for blacks would be open to whites too. The number of Boston minorities who could transfer to suburban districts would decrease. In proposing the $2,000 flat figure, Charles Glenn hoped that Metco would remain protected.

Does the proposed solution solve the problem of sufficient funds to encourage school districts to accept transfer students without excessively penalizing the school systems that the students choose to leave? Glenn's plan deprived the home district of the state aid attached to the transferring student after a year. And it offered only $2,000 to receiving districts for each transferring student—an amount he describes as high enough to encourage towns to accept students but low enough to discourage aggressive marketing. In fact, the $2,000 might not be sufficient to entice districts to make room for outsiders.[34] Again, Wisconsin has felt compelled to offer a bonus to suburban districts accepting inner-city minority students.

Equally important, although school districts may scoff at an offer of $2,000, taxpayers may balk at the price. For not all the money would have been transferred from another use. As Charles Glenn has noted, the plan would require "new resources devoted to education and not simply the diversion of existing funds into new channels."[35] Glenn was referring to a package of new expenses—not simply the cost of supplementary state aid. But the general point is clear: at a time when the state's budget is very tight, the plan proposed would require new educational money. And that may not sit well with those who have to foot the bill.

Is there a better solution? Chapter 5 will attempt to answer that question.

Admissions Criteria

"The principle behind the choice plan is hard to argue against in theoretical terms," Jane Usdan of the American Federation of Teachers has said. "But working it out so that it is truly fair is a whole other question."[36] The problem of admissions criteria illustrates the point well.

Who will want to transfer their children to a school in a district other than the one in which they reside? Mostly inner-city families. Some parents will want to switch their children between the affluent Massachusetts towns of Belmont and Lexington, but not many.[37] Belmont and Lexington families seldom need more choice; having the means to choose where they want to live, they have already directly or indirectly chosen their schools. Suburban, small town and even small city school systems are responsive enough to parental pressure to maintain a high level of parent satisfaction.[38]

How about students in largely blue-collar Massachusetts towns? Might not they prefer a school in a wealthier district? Perhaps some, but probably not many. Whites are often reluctant to cross the lines of social class. Low-income whites have been found to be the least likely to transfer from their assigned neighborhood schools.[39] There's a reason for this: the educational values of white working-class parents frequently differ from those of the more affluent. The one group emphasizes adherence to external standards, while the other stresses independence and initiative. White working-class parents generally prefer schools that emphasize authority and order, while the white middle class wants a more academically ambitious program that is centered on the individual child.[40]

The picture changes, however, when one's gaze shifts to the city. Unless Boston public schools greatly improve, both blacks and whites in the city are likely to be choice enthusiasts. And that's a problem. The suburbs are not likely to fling open their doors to large numbers of inner-city students because of the educational deprivations many bring with them and the extra attention they require.[41] The Boston suburbs have taken a limited number under the Metco plan; they are not likely to take many more, and in fact may be in the process of cutting back. Suburban resistance to inner-city transfers is a familiar problem. The state of Missouri has been ordered by federal courts to have several Kansas City suburban districts participate in a voluntary desegregation plan. The city is 75 percent black, and 8,000 black pupils have applied to transfer to integrated and white suburban schools. Despite financial compensation that is provided to both urban and suburban schools for such transfers, as of August 1989 none of the suburban school districts had accepted black students from the city.[42]

Minnesota is insisting that school systems with room accept out-of-district transfers. But Minnesota is demographically very different than Massachusetts, as noted earlier. Blacks constitute only 1.3 percent of its population. The state also leads the nation in its high school graduation rate: over 91 percent of its students complete twelve years of schooling.

Massachusetts is not Minnesota, but the problem of suburban resistance to urban transfers might be solved if suburban schools could pick and choose among the urban applicants, creaming the athletes and the more academically talented and motivated. Avon is recruiting transfers but does screen applicants on the basis of the student's record of attendance, behavior and grades. Metco applicants are screened by some receiving districts. Prospective students are educationally assessed and their families interviewed in Lexington and Wellesley. Brookline relies on educational assessment alone, and Lincoln on family interviews. Newton and Weston both use writing samples in addition to other indicators of academic promise.[43]

The Metco program allows but does not sanction such screening, and Metco spokespersons are reluctant to admit that it goes on. The proposed Massachusetts interdistrict choice plan for the state assumed that it shouldn't. This 1989 proposal stated explicitly that no student can be excluded or accepted "on the basis of race, sex, previous academic achievement, athletic or other extracurricular ability, handicapping conditions or proficiency in the English language." That nondiscrimination provision would leave the door open to exclusion on the basis of a previous disciplinary record—a door that the Minnesota legislation closes.[44]

Screening transfer applicants on the basis of academic or other skills raises questions to which there are no easy answers. Creaming obviously benefits those who are allowed to leave and it is morally difficult to justify keeping those students trapped in schools they do not wish to attend. But skimming could have a disastrous effect upon a district that lost its best and brightest. Senator Bulger has argued that the kids left behind—the Boston kids for whom Brookline has no place, for instance—will be no worse off than they already are. "At least now when a parent comes to complain," he says, "people will be more likely to listen."[45] That may or may not be true. The school administration in Boston and elsewhere has long been turning a deaf ear to complaints, and the students left behind could be worse off. The system could quickly spiral downhill. The students most successful academically often come from the families that are most committed to quality education and their departure would leave the schools without an important human resource. If a disproportionate number of middle-class students leave, then the percentage of kids who are poor and disadvantaged increases. Yet disadvantaged children seem to learn more when they attend school with middle-class youngsters.[46] And schools with a substantial number of middle-class students attract and retain quality teachers. Boston's schools may well have suffered from the departure of the Metco students, who come from families that are academically ambitious for their kids.

It is no secret that teachers generally prefer schools with substantial numbers of academically motivated children from advantaged families.[47] Students from poor families are often harder to teach; the typical teacher prefers the skilled and eager student. Patrick Welsh, makes the point in *Tales Out of School*. "A good image in the community," he writes, "was essential as we struggled to keep the support of Alexandria's middle-class families in the face of competition from private schools. None of us wanted T.C. to be just a place for the poor and disadvantaged. Each year we brandished our National Merit Scholarships, Ivy League acceptances, and science prizes to persuade anxious, middle-class parents that their children could get as good an education at the local public high school as at the expensive, mostly white private schools."[48] The future National Merit scholars were the students almost every teacher wanted; some members of the faculty simply refused to teach the kids whose reading was substandard.[49] By extension, the greater the concentration of poorly prepared students, the less the likelihood that teachers such as Welsh will gravitate to the school and stay there.

A plan that allowed screening would be vulnerable to the charge of racism. A disproportionate number of the children whom the schools would not want would be black or Hispanic. The reason: current differences in academic performance across racial and ethnic groups. In Boston, black and white students are, on average, reading at different levels. In 1988 average reading scores (as measured by the Metropolitan Achievement Tests) of black students in every grade were at least 17 percentage points below those of whites. In six out of eleven grades the gap between blacks and whites was more than 25 percentage points. In other words, a high percentage of black students are at risk. By high school 53 percent fell below the 40th percentile in reading. The picture was much the same for Hispanics and much the same in math.[50]

But to insist that school systems select out-of-district transfers randomly (or that a centralized administrative structure be allowed to do so) creates its own set of problems. It is argued that choice creates a better match between school and student; if so, then logically the schools should have some say about what sort of student will fit in. This is the reason—or the excuse—that District 4 in New York gives for screening both inter- and intradistrict applicants to its schools of choice. Critics charge that the kids who are most at risk get shunted off to the weakest schools, where they feel rejected and stigmatized. But the director of alternative programs argues that, without selectivity, a family with an unrealistic sense of a student's ability to meet academically rigorous demands would choose an inappropriate school.[51]

In addition, if rules against selectivity are in place, they can be quietly subverted. A version of screening is likely to go on.[52] Schools will make sure certain students either don't come or don't stay. The family will come to look at the school and they will be told that it's an awful place or the wrong place for their child—the child won't be happy. As a last resort, school systems can refuse to take any out-of-district child at all. State law, it is true, can be written to prohibit such refusals to participate, but districts can always assert that they are full.

If schools that can't impose admission requirements for out-of-district transfers simply close their doors to all applicants, then inner-city students who would have been accepted are left trapped in urban schools. Perhaps those who would have been left behind benefit from their presence. The more motivated students serve as role models and keep teachers happy. But, from the perspective of the trapped students, egalitarian and other concerns have deprived them of a chance for a better education—an education that students with wealthier parents can obtain.[53] So, while there are strong arguments for insisting that receiving schools take applicants without regard to academic or other talents, a good case can be made as well for selectivity. The opposing arguments amount to what Nathan Glazer has called "a tragic conflict of values that simply cannot be mitigated."[54]

The Transportation Problem

Even where space is available and the school district is ready and willing to receive out-of-district students, families may not be able to take advantage of the program because they can't get their children to the school of their choice. Open enrollment both within districts and across district lines will be most meaningful where the cost of transportation is low—in places with well-developed public transportation systems.[55] No student residing in New York's District 4, for instance, has a transportation problem; the district of 14,000 pupils occupies less than one square mile and is served not only by school buses but by the extensive New York City transit system.[56] Where distances are great and public transportation unavailable, students have to own a car themselves or their parents have to haul them. Often neither solution is feasible.

Low-income families will be disadvantaged by any system that does not provide free transportation. Minnesota provides no rides across district lines. The families or students participating in the interdistrict choice plan must find a way to get at least to the boundary of the receiving city or town, at which point they can hop aboard regular school buses. An exception is made for students in families with an income below the federal poverty line; the state reimburses them for the use of public transportation—where it exists. That means that small town and rural students must fend for themselves. The Minnesota interdistrict choice program is used least by those who most need better schooling: low-income, inner-city blacks. Whites in Minneapolis (more affluent and more able to provide for private transportation) were twice as likely as blacks to apply for a transfer.[57]

Minnesota and other states have a genuine problem: providing transportation is expensive. Missouri has been providing transportation for the 11,000 black students in St. Louis who have chosen to attend a suburban school; the average per pupil transportation cost in the 1987-88 school year was $1,677. The per pupil figure was more than double for traffic going the other way. Since very few white suburban students chose to attend the city schools, economies of scale could not be realized. The per pupil transportation cost for the suburban kids came to a staggering $3,517.[58] In the Milwaukee-suburban voluntary desegregation plan, the interdistrict transportation costs for the students who chose to participate were also very high. While the average per pupil cost of transportation in Wisconsin for the 1986-87 school year was $256, the figure for the Milwaukee program was $2,100.[59] It's more complicated—and more expensive—to transport relatively few students across district lines than to arrange buses to serve the internal needs of one school system. If transportation is provided, interdistrict choice will often involve the use of small buses, vans, and taxis to carry small groups of children to widely scattered schools.[60]

In Massachusetts, Metco students are transported at considerable state expense. Avon educates out-of-district students for a relatively low price but has not been willing to foot the transportation bill. Getting there is the parents' problem. The state's 1989 draft plan for interdistrict choice would provide free transportation for students entitled to free and reduced-price meals. But the plan would excuse a host district from any obligation to provide transportation "in the event that the small number of students participating renders it impractical." This arrangement was intended, Glenn explains, "to impose a standard of reasonable cost upon any entitlement to transportation." In addition, families not entitled to free transportation could use existing school bus services at no cost if space were available and if no additional costs were imposed on the community providing the transportation. That seems to be as reasonable a solution as any.

Other Considerations

Maintaining racial balance. Unless the state's commitment to maintaining racial and ethnic balance changes, the numbers of white students able to leave an urban school district will depend either on the number of minorities who also want to exit or on the number of whites eager to transfer in. The 1989 plan would not only prohibit interdistrict transfers that would adversely affect racial balance, but would give priority to applicants whose transfers promote desegregation.[61] Minnesota also has a racial balance clause, but the state has so few minorities that the provision is insignificant.

Parental involvement. Proponents of choice argue that a family is more likely to be involved in a school it has chosen and that this involvement will be educationally beneficial. But the further the school is from home, the less likely the parental involvement, it would seem. As the Wisconsin state schools superintendent has said, "It's hard for parents to visit the school when the school is 10 miles away...."[62] A problem that plagues intradistrict choice is exacerbated by moving across district lines—unless, of course, the chosen school is in another district yet close to home or work.

Information. The problem of providing meaningful information to parents may also be exacerbated with interdistrict plans. No single agency in Minnesota collects and distributes educational information. Parents can't easily find out what courses are offered where, or how the students in different schools are doing on standardized tests. It has been "almost a conspiracy" of silence, a legislative auditor in the state has charged. That picture may be changing—the state is beginning to run workshops on educational options for minority and disadvantaged students.[63]

Creating quality education. For many reasons interdistrict choice is likely to create only the most limited market. Were the marketplace truly to govern, the result might be better schools from the perspective of parent (and perhaps student) satisfaction. But, as chapter 3 argued, this does not necessarily mean academically better schools. What parents and students want and choose will often have little to do with academic rigor. In Minnesota, students seldom transfer to out-of-district schools for educational reasons.[64] One superintendent in the state reports that three students have left his district because they found the graduation requirements too tough.[65] That's not surprising. Some students will gravitate towards schools that are more convenient or that offer a particular sport or a socially more congenial atmosphere; others will run from schools that make demands they don't want to meet.[66]

Parents do not necessarily want academic quality and they may be sold a shoddy bill of goods. Markets encourage the aggressive recruiting of customers. If advertising is unregulated, it will sometimes be deceptive. In Minnesota public vocational-technical schools of choice have been selling their dubious wares to a gullible clientele.

Funded by the state on the basis of student enrollment, their survival depends on keeping their numbers up.[67]

That problem shouldn't be hard to fix; the state could impose substantial funding penalties for unsavory tricks of the trade. But what about the schools that sell academically dubious wares to a knowing public? Schools will sacrifice academic quality to attract customers, choice critics charge. They will take to selling their athletic programs, raiding other schools for players, and draining resources from math in order to purchase the equipment and coaching.

Schools can be stopped from recruiting athletes (and switching resources to sports in order to do so) by a one-year ban on athletic participation for all incoming transfers. Iowa and Arkansas have just such a ban.[68] But, as Minnesota has recognized, that rule pressures athletes with academic reasons for switching schools to stay put. And, as former Governor Perpich pointed out, there is nothing wrong with transferring for such personal reasons as an interest in the football program at a competing school. Students have different interests and talents. Families choose private schools on such grounds. Why not the public schools?

Governor Perpich could have made a larger point. Already public schools are pressured to put sports before books. That's what most parents want. In most towns, football, not debate, is the team that most people like to watch. And market regulation won't solve that problem. Schools themselves have to get their priorities straight. Doing so may require ignoring rather than honoring parents' preference for athletic excellence over scholastic achievement. Schools won't recruit athletes if a winning football team is no longer their first priority.

As chapter 3 argued, choice advocates tend to ignore the tension between popularity and academic quality. That tension already weakens the commitment of schools to academic excellence. For most parents in most communities the quality of American history instruction is not of overriding interest. The schools know it and are not indifferent to parental values. Interdistrict choice itself won't fix the problem; consumer-driven education might actually exacerbate it. The solution has to lie with the school systems themselves; if they were to commit themselves to quality education, they might even increase the demand for it. In a market, savvy businesses do not simply respond to existing consumer taste; they create new products that, in turn, shape that taste. Whether or not choice creates a true market for education, schools can do the same—they can create educational products that strengthen the demand for academic excellence.

In Sum

Giving families the option of transferring their children to schools across district lines would probably have limited impact on educational quality. The market that choice proponents envision is not likely to materialize. The reason is simple: at best, parent interest in interdistrict choice is likely to be limited.

To begin with, not many parents will want to transport a child to a school to which no bus goes. Perhaps more important, most parents will be happy to have their children stay put. As Chubb and Moe acknowledge, suburban and rural schools generally satisfy their constituents. The same can be said of schools in smaller cities and outlying towns.

It is hard to imagine a day when a lot of parents would run after a distinctive sort of education in another community. Some parents would take advantage of the opportunity to transfer their children across district lines. But many of those parents would be seeking convenience or a different social setting—not better education.

Certainly that has been the experience of Minnesota. A parent survey, conducted during the 1987–88 school year, revealed that 26 percent of the families who took advantage of open enrollment did so for reasons of convenience—the school of their choice was closer to home, job, or day care. Twenty-one percent made the switch for social reasons—to alleviate a peer problem, for instance. Fourteen percent of parents either wanted their children in the school that they themselves attended or wanted them to remain where they started out.[69] Ohio County, West Virginia, operates a choice plan and has found much the same thing: families switch schools primarily for reasons unrelated to education. Proximity to a day care center that their children could attend before and after school was a major reason for requesting a transfer.[70]

Most parents, then, are not likely to be interested in hauling their children across district lines in search of a distinctive education. And, even if they were, they wouldn't find it. This is not only because the interdistrict option won't create an array of different schools. The problem is deeper than that. If most parents want to use their local schools, most schools will continue to try to serve the range of students who come to them, and will do so by offering an eclectic mix of courses and teaching styles. Schools will have no incentive to become distinctive because they will see their mission as being all things to all people.

Unless the school systems in Boston and other major cities dramatically improve, the greatest demand for interdistrict choice is likely to be in the greater metropolitan areas where public transportation is available and where the local schools command less loyalty. Most families—urban, suburban and rural—want to stick close to home.[71] The level of parental dissatisfaction with the local schools is much greater in Boston than in, say, Maynard, Auburn, or Lenox—relatively cohesive communities at some distance from any city. Were Boston students to have easy access to schools in such suburban towns as Brookline and Belmont, the demand might be quite high.

But a market requires both demand and supply. In the greater metropolitan areas in the state, the supply of available classroom seats is likely to be limited, for all the reasons discussed. Just how limited would depend on the precise funding arrangement and the liberty given to receiving schools to set admissions standards.

The admissions problem is easier to solve than that of funding. Applicants to suburban schools under the Metco program are screened. Such screening raises legitimate concerns, the most serious of which involve the impact of creaming on the inner-city schools that will have to continue to serve many students. But the arguments for allowing a school to accept the students that are right for it—provided race is not a criterion—are strong.

The funding problem is much more difficult. A solution will probably require a radical change in the way education is financed in Massachusetts. If dollars are to follow students, the state may have to pick up a larger share of education costs. Even in Minnesota, where the state's share of average per pupil costs is 60 percent, Governor Perpich proposed that the percentage be raised to 85 in order to solve equity problems.[72]

Interdistrict public school choice in Massachusetts (if introduced) would create only the most limited market. But competition, as chapter 3 suggested, is probably not the secret to school improvement. The incentive system is unlikely to work as choice advocates hope. To recognize the limits of the market as a mechanism for ensuring educational excellence, however, is not to suggest that choice is a bad idea. Interdistrict options—like intradistrict choice—can be justified on other grounds. Choice might indirectly facilitate reform by keeping the more educationally committed middle-class families in the public school system. Most important, choice has value in itself. It enhances personal liberty; it expands the freedom of families to shape their lives as they see fit. But choice among public schools—whether in or out of the district—is still limited choice. Should the range of options be expanded to include private and parochial schools? That is the question that chapter 5 addresses.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vouchers

The limited choice that Massachusetts now offers is easily accepted by policymakers, parents, and school department staff. Almost nothing about the traditional system of running schools has been changed, except some lucky parents get to choose the schools their children attend and others do not. To allow more choice—across district lines and without controls for racial balance—would require legislation not easily enacted. The civil rights lobby in Massachusetts (as elsewhere) is strong, and the commitment to integration—even if it requires involuntary assignments—runs deep in the Commonwealth. Yet here too, the educational system would remain largely unaltered. Vouchers are another matter. When public money is made available to pay tuition to private and parochial schools, hard questions are raised.

◆ To whom should schools (as a publicly funded and publicly sanctioned service) be accountable? Only their customers or all citizens? Shouldn't public money imply public control? Don't taxpayers have a right to say how their money is spent?

◆ What will prevent the appearance of wretched schools? The problem of questionable schools that have a clientele is multifaceted. The argument for public school choice cannot rest on the assumption that parents will choose quality education; they won't necessarily. But the impact of a public school market is likely to be neutral. Bad schools will simply remain bad; they won't get any worse. Choice extended to the private and parochial schools could actually result in a decline in educational quality. As Nicholas Lemann has suggested, the availability of government tuition stipends might result in the creation of a lot of diploma mills in the ghetto. Schools would be free to be bad.[1]

◆ Are schools that are culturally abhorrent to the majority of taxpayers okay? If families control the sort of education they buy, their purchases will reflect their particular taste. The taste of some families may appall others. Some families may want an education for their children that revolves around certain religious or ethnic values, for instance. Should education be entirely a matter of personal taste?

Choice proponents seem to assume that if families have a right to raise their children to adhere to their values, then that right should extend to the school hours. What the families do at home, the schools should honor. They are not alone in having these convictions. Bilingual education proponents also argue against weaning kids away from the native culture of their parents. It is the job of schools to reinforce that culture, in their view.

It is a very recent way of thinking. Until the late 1960s public school education was generally thought to be the means by which children would *escape* the confines of their family's culture, as James S. Coleman and others have noted.[2] Public school systems were often at war with the values of immigrant groups. Italian immigrants, for example, wanted their children at work, not in school. They were opposed by teachers, settlement house workers and other members of the reform-minded middle class, who saw schools as the vehicle by which children were to be liberated from the crippling culture of their families.

Family culture was seen as often antithetical to the needs of children. America, it was said, was a land of opportunity. It was an open society in which poor boys and girls could make good. Schools had a role to play in realizing that promise. They pried children away from the parochial culture of their families, expanding their minds and their horizons.

Is it a hopelessly antiquated idea that not all families know best? Will the cultures of some families work to restrict rather than expand the ambitions and opportunities of their children? We need innovative schools, reformers often say. Are all forms of educational innovation that appeal to parents equally acceptable?

◆ Is the only purpose of schools to meet individual or family needs? What about the needs of the larger society? "Parents and students in a democratic school system have a right to participate…but…no right to win," Chubb and Moe complain.[3] But why should they? Why is their right the only one that should count? Society too has a stake in the substance of the educational policies ultimately put into effect.[4]

We have never looked to our schools simply to teach the three Rs. As Henry Levin, professor of education at Stanford University, argues, it is "widely recognized that democratic and capitalist societies must rely heavily upon their schools to provide an education that will preserve and support the fundamental political, social and economic institutions that comprise those societies and that make it possible to change those societies in a democratic fashion."[5] Schools, in other words, educate children in the civic culture. American society relies upon its teachers to turn diverse children into citizens, speaking a common language, committed to the American political and economic culture, and prepared to make it work. No other country in the world has opened its doors to so many different people, and none has so successfully integrated immigrant groups into the culture, creating a stable polity. Other countries make greater use of educational choice, advocates say, but those countries are so demographically different as to make the point worthless.

Strong choice advocates downplay the social purposes of schools and dismiss the worth of what Chubb and Moe call "higher-order values." But some of those values, expressed in rules and regulations that bind and guide public school teachers, speak of our hopes for a just and enduring society.

Strong arguments can be made for embedding schools in those institutions of democratic governance that Chubb and Moe dismiss. Those arguments do not need to be confronted as long as choice is confined to public schools. But if parents are given public money to send their children to private and church-affiliated schools, public schools may not survive. Are we ready to give up entirely on public education?

The Case for Vouchers

The arguments against vouchers cannot be lightly dismissed. But they do not constitute a closed case. The arguments *for* vouchers are not so easy to ignore either.

◆ Many parents already choose their children's schools. They select a public school by choosing where to live, or a private or parochial one by choosing to pay. Only low-income families are not guaranteed choice. They must rely on a system that is a monopoly—with no competitors to turn to. The system thus promises freedom only to those who can afford it.

This point must be stated with care. Voucher advocates often rely heavily upon it in making their case for nonpublic options. Yet the choice being exercised by the more affluent families is largely within the public system. The high-income family that uses the school system in Weston, Massachusetts, where average family income is the highest in the state, has taken advantage of a public school option. While it may seem unfair that the rich should have more options than the poor, that is generally the case in a market economy. The rich can buy a BMW; the poor cannot. But education, it can be argued, is basic; true, but so are housing and health care. The question is always: What policies will guarantee what degree of equality and at what cost? Society may have a stake in maintaining public schools as the dominant form of education. We may not want to fund the ability of families to exit as an entitlement.

◆ Private and parochial schools may do a better job than public schools in educating disadvantaged urban youth. The Catholic school advantage seems particularly marked, James S. Coleman's findings indicate.[6] Specifically, fifteen years ago in Boston, busing was initiated and hopes ran high that integration and quality education would go hand in hand. In the intervening years another generation of youngsters has gone through the schools and the black and Hispanic students continue to perform poorly. At the same time a number of private and parochial schools in the city do seem to be doing an excellent job in educating disadvantaged kids.[7] Cathedral High School, a Catholic school in

Boston (which charges only $1,950), has a student population that is 97 percent minority (62 percent black), and in 1989 it sent 85 percent of its graduating seniors on to an institution of higher education. Vouchers have an obvious appeal: they would extricate at least some students from schools that are serving them badly and place them in schools with a record of academic success.

For twenty-five years Massachusetts has questioned whether Boston students are best served by Boston public schools. The Metco program is the expression of that doubt. But that program is skewed towards the elite in the black community; not only do host towns screen applicants, but black families fortunate enough to be well connected may go to the head of its long waiting list. It also helps to be persistent. The group eligible for vouchers, in contrast, would include students who have not displayed any obvious academic interest or skill, and whose families are without political or other influence. All students—not just those who are black—would be candidates for participation.

This point must also be stated with care, lest promises be made that cannot be fulfilled. Urban private and parochial schools have a track record that they may not be able to sustain once their doors are opened more widely. Most of the students now in these schools have come from families willing to make a sacrifice for their children's education; the commitment of that self-selected group may be the secret of the schools' success.[8] We will only know with further experience.

◆ Private and parochial schools might also do a better job than public schools in providing a civic education. With few exceptions they have historically provided just the sort of education in the civic culture that public school proponents want.[9] They have taught the common language, the way a market economy and democratic processes work, the limits to majority rule, and the obligations of the citizenry. The obvious exception has been the segregation academies, and no public funding need go to schools that intentionally discriminate. Of course the past is no necessary guide to the future. Critics could be right that vouchers open the door to "cult schools" that encourage "tribalism" and "teach astrology."[10] But so far, so good. And how many schools would we be talking about? Most parents, it seems safe to guess, would want quite a conventional education for their children.

Public schools, in fact, may be a source of greater concern. They may be falling down on their historic job. The theory may be better than the reality. Public school advocates worry that private and parochial schools—if they become the dominant forms of education—will cater to the particular interests of particular groups. Schools will cease to educate children in the values and language of the larger culture. But are public schools fulfilling this responsibility now? Graduates of bilingual education programs have often learned neither English nor much American history.[11] Proposals now being discussed in New York State may result in changes in the state curriculum that amount to an ethnic definition of knowledge.[12]

If the plan in New York proceeds, the history curriculum, in particular, will become politicized and ethnocentric. Race and ethnicity will become the dominant prism through which all historical events are examined. The working assumption will be that children learn best from the experiences of people of the same race, and that no common American culture is either possible or desirable. And once the curriculum is changed—once the booklets that dictate what should be taught are altered—then the state's Regents' test will be revised as well.

Parents have always been able to buy an education geared to a religious, ethnic or other group with which they strongly identified; even parents who send their children to a public school often supplement that education with religious or other instruction. But the public schools are seen as having a different mission. "Common" schools, they were once called—schools that should celebrate diversity (as one of the nation's strengths) but never a particular religious or ethnic heritage. As the distinguished education historian Diane Ravitch has argued, Afrocentrism and other such curricular changes throw into question the very idea of American public education. If public schools cease to transmit common values and a shared culture, the main argument in support of their exclusive claim to taxpayers' money will have lost its force.[13]

♦ With vouchers, participating students in Massachusetts cities such as Boston and Lawrence, where the majority of students are black, Hispanic and Asian, would have the opportunity to attend schools that are more integrated than any in the public system. Social class integration would likely increase. Low-income students would be joining the middle class in the schools they already attend.

♦ More educational choice might mean more moderate-income families choosing to remain in the city. Some families (we don't know how many) must now be leaving the city to escape having either to use the public school system or pay tuition. A certain percentage of these (it can be assumed) would stay if either the public schools improved or the nongovernmental schools were, in effect, free. The city would benefit from their continuing presence. Neighborhoods might become more ethnically and economically heterogeneous if school choices expanded. Different sorts of families might choose to live next door to one another if they knew they could send their children (with public funds) to quite different schools.

♦ The bloated educational bureaucracy that many see as a major obstacle to quality education may be a permanent feature of a public system. Reducing it significantly while retaining the public school monopoly on tax dollars may be impossible.

Bureaucracy, Chubb and Moe argue, "arises naturally and inevitably out of...efforts at democratic control....American political institutions give all the major players strong incentives to pressure for more bureaucracy...."[14] In the absence of bureaucratic constraints, the people at the top can never be sure their wishes will be faithfully carried out by those below. And without extensive rules and regulations, those who have momentarily captured the reigns of public authority cannot be sure that their policies will last when the balance of power shifts.

It may be true—yet somewhat misleadingly stated. The real problem may be *public* bureaucracies specifically. What is seen as bureaucratic fat in a public setting may look very different in a private one. As

Myron Lieberman points out, private schools might hire more administrators if they could afford to do so.[15] And private markets often create private bureaucracies. Schools in a market system may not be any more autonomous than McDonald's restaurants are. They may be subject to a multitude of rules, just as restaurants in a chain are. But McDonald's can deliver a product that satisfies the public, and public schools seem to have difficulty doing so.[16] Why?

One reason is that in the absence of a profit motive, a time-serving mentality takes over. That is the David Kearns point, cited earlier. If a school does badly, nothing happens; if it does well, nothing happens. The problem is not only the lack of incentives to perform, however. The system does not foster a clear definition of good performance. The owner of a small business knows when she is a success; the money is rolling in. A teacher may never quite know when his performance is an A plus. The question of quality is complicated and may, today, have more to do with following procedure than with actually teaching a student to read or write.

Procedure becomes too important for two reasons. When the government puts up the capital (in the form of an appropriation), it imposes severe constraints on the use of resources. No constraint is irrational; the government will insist, for instance, that teachers are hired, fired, and promoted in ways that are "fair." But the rules of fairness may be at odds with the demands of excellence, which no business can afford to ignore.

The problem of constraints is exacerbated by the variety of sources that succeed in imposing them and the variety of different jobs that become part of the educational task. A sixth grade teacher is supposed to cover certain material. But he must also make sure that bilingual and special education students get what they are entitled to; that established discipline procedures are followed; that the children are not exposed to the "wrong" books—the Bible for instance; and so forth. If certain procedures are violated, it may be the guy at the top rather than the teacher at the bottom who gets in hot water. Moreover, trouble can come in the form of perhaps the ultimate hassle: judicial intervention. Hence there is a focus on processes rather than outcomes. They are easier to judge and of more immediate importance. If no one is learning much but the room is neat, as the rules dictate, no one is likely to make trouble.

In short, government agencies may have special problems. Private and parochial schools may be better than public schools in part because they are free from the constraints imposed by a public bureaucracy.[17]

♦ When families are more or less conscripted into schools they would not choose, those schools are forced to deal with a frustrated, angry clientele.[18] Public school choice may not entirely solve this problem, but vouchers, by offering parents more diverse choices, are likely to result in more committed clients. Every institution needs loyal patrons. The distinguished sociologist James S. Coleman has been comparing Catholic and public schools. Seemingly unpromising students who flounder in the public schools often do well in Catholic schools. His explanation (in part): parochial schools and the parents who send their children to them form an adult community, which resists the contemporary revolution that has undermined parental authority. The students themselves—especially those whose immediate family is weak or broken—look to the schools as family. The schools as a result have a loyal, supportive clientele. The families believe in the schools because they know they can rely upon them to implement their desires and enforce their norms. The students obey them either because they accept the authority of their parents and school as inseparable and proper, or because the school has become the family they need and want.[19]

♦ Finally, as argued earlier, choice is a value in itself. In the public school context, the intrinsic value of choice trumps competing considerations. In the context of vouchers, however, other legitimate considerations—the importance, for example, of a common education in common schools—come into play.

These are, in my view, the strongest arguments for contemplating vouchers. Others are made which have not been included. Vouchers can be defended on First Amendment grounds; they are intrinsic to the exercise of the free speech and freedom of religion guarantees, it is said.[20] Vouchers will create a true market and an educational market is a panacea for our school ills, many proponents believe. These arguments, for reasons that should be clear, seem less than fully persuasive to me.

The case I do make is far from airtight. Radical choice plans raise hard questions. These questions are difficult to answer in part because they involve value conflicts, and in part because we are awash in theory and have very few facts. We don't actually know what the results would be of turning parents loose, with public money, to shop among new and established schools—public, private and parochial.

At the boundary of the public school system, the case for options loses its clarity. To move into the realm of private and parochial choice is to enter largely unexplored territory. There are good arguments for holding back and good arguments for marching boldly ahead. The philosophical differences that divide the opposing camps will not be easily reconciled. But more information will help us assess the worth of alternative courses of action.

A pilot voucher program might provide this information. We have almost no experience with vouchers in this country. They have long been discussed. It is time to give them a try on a limited scale in an effort to settle some of the questions that critics raise.

A Modest Proposal

The proposed pilot program would look something like this:

♦ Participation would be open, at the outset, to a relatively small number of disadvantaged public school students (no less than 500, no more than 1,000) selected randomly from among a group of young elementary school applicants. To provide for a control group that remains in the public schools, the applicant group would have to be twice as large as the number of spaces available.[21] To be eligible a student would have to come from a family whose income was no more than perhaps 50 percent above the poverty level. Voucher proponents argue that many students whose parents cannot afford an alternative to public education would do better in private and church-affiliated schools; restricting eligibility to the disadvantaged student would test that theory. This restriction would also protect the program from the charge that it was designed to help those who were already helping themselves—students from the more affluent families who were already choosing a school of their liking.

The educational progress of the control group could be watched and compared with that of the students who had accepted the vouchers. The only difference between the two groups of students would be the luck of the initial draw. Over time (five years perhaps), something might be learned about the value of private and parochial school attendance for students who would otherwise be using the public system.[22]

Differences in performance between the two groups would also be highlighted by restricting participation to the elementary grades. The younger students are most likely to benefit from an altered educational environment; their minds are still open to learning.

In restricting the program initially to disadvantaged families, it should be noted, I have taken my cue from the Milwaukee voucher plan that was the brainchild of Wisconsin legislator Polly Williams. The point would be to draw from the group of students now doing especially poorly in the public schools. Focusing on that group does create the risk that if these children, hard to educate in any setting, fail to thrive educationally, we may learn little about the benefits of vouchers. On the other hand, if the pool were to consist of kids who were relatively easy to educate, any positive results would certainly be ignored by voucher critics.[23]

♦ Any school—private or parochial—could participate. The inclusion of church-affiliated schools would raise constitutional problems, which are discussed below. But their exclusion would create funding and space problems.

Except at the elementary school level, only the parochial schools charge fees that are low enough to make them likely candidates for participation in a voucher scheme. (Certain private schools might elect to participate in the experiment by offering seats at reduced tuition.) Many parochial schools have significant room to expand. From 1981 to 1987 enrollment in Catholic schools in New England declined by about 12 percent; in Boston specifically there has been a drop in attendance of almost 10 percent. A few schools have closed, but most have remained open and appear ready to accommodate more students.[24]

Schools willing to participate would have to accept a minimum of ten voucher students and a maximum of fifty. Too few students at any one school and the impact of the school itself on the performance of those students would be hard to judge. The students might be a particularly promising, self-selected group. If, alternatively, large numbers of students were to be concentrated in a few schools, the results would also be hard to read. Those few schools could be idiosyncratically able to deliver quality education.[25]

The schools should be in only two or three communities. Only one town and the results might not be generalizable. But too many and the project would be cumbersome to coordinate. A larger number would make the project difficult to monitor.

◆ Any student could apply, but not every student (with the luck to win in the lottery) would be entitled to attend the school of his or her choice. A school with selective admissions policies would not be required to take students who did not meet its standards. A high proportion of the private nondenominational schools have competitive admissions. But Catholic schools admit almost all who apply (on a space-available basis); they may require an entrance exam, but the results are generally used for purposes of placement only. It would be the very rare student who was entitled to a voucher but could not find a school to attend.

For this reason too, the inclusion of parochial schools in the plan is essential. They are most likely to accept the students with average or below-average test scores. Their exclusion would exacerbate a problem that already plagues urban schools: a high proportion of the most academically ambitious, gifted and disciplined have left, many by way of Metco. The voucher program proposed here would only minimally further cream the schools.

♦ The source of the funding and the amount of the voucher is a question too complicated to be settled here. But here is one possible guideline: the amount should always be less than what public schools work with. John Coons has rightly argued that "politics and good sense require that the playing field be level or even tipped toward the state schools."[26] It is in our interest as a society (I suggested earlier) to give the public system every possible chance to succeed. Public schools may serve an important political and cultural function—we don't know for sure.

A voucher worth about half of what many public school systems spend on each pupil annually would almost pay the tuition at most parochial schools. Massachusetts private schools are expensive; on the average, high school charges are over $12,000. But the tuition at Catholic schools is in the range of $2,000 to $4,000. Cathedral High School, with its nearly all-minority student population and its stunning record of academic success, charges only $1,950. And while a few schools hover around the $4,000 mark, all offer financial aid.[27]

In lieu of financial aid, parents might help at the school. In Milwaukee, the Urban Day School, a private institution, relies on donations to keep its tuition low and then offers to reduce it further for those parents who volunteer to work at the school.[28]

♦ Transportation would not be provided by the state, but that may not be a problem. In the current controlled choice plan in Boston and elsewhere, students are being extensively bused. Give their families free rein to choose any public, private or parochial school and they will likely choose something close by.

Transportation might become an issue in a full-blown voucher plan, since space in existing inexpensive urban schools would probably be quickly exhausted. But places can likely be found for the limited number of students who would be participating in the pilot program.

♦ The pilot program should be evaluated by an independent team. Evaluation by school personnel would create the problem that now plagues the parent information centers in Massachusetts controlled choice cities: the information is not from a disinterested source. The school personnel have a stake in the outcome. Independent evaluators would design questionnaires and achievement tests. They would assess attitudinal and behavioral changes, which gauge the students' preparation for entry into the work force, as well as academic improvement.

The Bad News

The bad news about this proposal is that it would undoubtedly be challenged in federal court on grounds of violating the U.S. Constitution, and would almost certainly require a change in the Massachusetts Constitution.

Public funds for parochial education are the problem. The federal constitutional question is more murky than the state one.[29] The United States Supreme Court has allowed some state aid to parochial students for some purposes, but its holdings are hard to decipher. Aid for bus transportation is okay, except when the bus is being used for a field trip. Aid for textbooks got a green light, but not aid for workbooks. Generally, aid to a religious enterprise is unconstitutional if it serves a religious purpose, if its primary impact is to advance or inhibit religion, or if it would force the government to regulate the enterprise. Regulation amounts to religious entanglement, and entanglement is a breach in that wall of separation between church and state that the First Amendment erects. However, as one scholar has noted, there is no constitutional requirement to discriminate against church-affiliated institutions. The First Amendment is not hostile to religion or religious choice.[30] Thus the Court has upheld a state law that gave parents a tax break for parochial school tuition on the theory that the benefit went to the parents, not the school. It has also allowed public funds to be used to pay the tuition of a student at a Bible college. A number of court watchers think that a majority on the Rehnquist Court might look favorably upon vouchers, which would directly help children and only indirectly the school.[31]

The Massachusetts state constitution is unfortunately even more of an obstacle. Article XLVI explicitly prohibits the use of public money for church-affiliated primary and secondary schools. (The amendment does make exceptions for handicapped students. Might socioeconomic disadvantage qualify as a handicap?) Article XLVI originally prohibited the use of state funds for religious institutions of higher education, but this article was amended in 1974. That amendment passed with virtually no opposition.

Some of the arguments used to support the 1974 amendment are applicable to the question of public aid for parochial elementary and secondary schools. Colleges and universities that are not part of the public system provide a public service. They educate students whose schooling taxpayers would otherwise have to finance. If the Commonwealth continues to bar public aid to private and parochial institutions, some might close, proponents of the amendment warned. The result would be an enormous increase in the tax burden.

In addition, it was said, not all students are alike. Some will do fine at one of the state schools; others should go elsewhere. The state should open educational doors—not close them. While the public purse cannot be used to subsidize religious activities, it can be used for the secular purpose of furthering the education of the young in schools that meet their needs.[32]

Such arguments are easily extended to the question of public aid for primary and secondary church-related schools. If state institutions of higher education do not meet every student's needs, neither do public primary and secondary schools. If parochial schools close (as many may be forced to do), taxes will go up. It has been estimated that if all the students in Catholic schools in the Boston area alone were to transfer to the public system, the cost to the taxpayers (in 1990 dollars) would be over $50 million.[33] If the public aid for education is aid for the student (not the school), as backers of the 1974 amendment agreed, then the point holds at every level. Indeed the children who attend Catholic schools are not necessarily Catholic and neither are their teachers. In New England only about 25 percent of the teaching staff in the Catholic schools belong to the Catholic church. The student body of Cathedral High School, of which the Archdiocese is justly proud, was only 48 percent Catholic in the 1989-90 school year.[34] In any one school, the recipients of the aid would represent a variety of faiths.

The arguments are clear and strong, but passage of a constitutional amendment would be politically difficult. The higher education amendment was unopposed, but the teachers' union, for one, would lobby hard against any subsidy for schools that would compete with the public system. In addition, the amendment process is cumbersome and lengthy—as it should be.

One alternative to a constitutional amendment might be privately funded vouchers. It is an alternative that John Coons and Stephen Sugarman have been proposing. Businesses, they say, that are currently donating to schools should switch their aid from the provider to the consumer. The money would be funneled to families (who can select schools of their choice) through an organization set up to dispense scholarships. As Coons and Sugarman argue, this notion should be appealing to business leaders, who would no longer have to worry about which schools or church organizations are the most deserving. The parents can make that choice for them.[35] A variation on this theme is already in place in New York City, where the Student/Sponsor Partnership Program is moving disadvantaged students from the public system into parochial high schools. These students are supported by adult sponsors who agree to pay their tuition.[36]

The Good News

There is good news as well. Constitutional problems aside, the plan is feasible. It does not call for the destruction of the public system as we know it. Nor does it involve the construction of new schools, with their high start-up costs.[37] It builds upon what is already in place—namely, a significant number of private and parochial schools that have room for more students. Chubb and Moe, in their attention-getting proposal, merge the private sector into a completely refurbished public one. This proposal simply moves some students from the public system into the private one.

In doing so, it takes as its starting point what should be regarded as a given—the commitment of many families, especially in Boston, to sending their children to private and church-affiliated schools. It is sometimes said, as the journalist Hodding Carter has put it, that public schools won't get better unless "America's most affluent and best educated people offer their own children in large numbers to the public school mix."[38] If so, the prospects for improvement are zero. In the foreseeable future in Boston, New York and elsewhere, those who can afford private and parochial schools are likely to continue to take advantage of that option. Even if the "most affluent and best educated" are going to stay put, those who are less advantaged need not do so. If the rich won't join the poor, the poor can join the rich. Or, more accurately, the relatively rich—those with the bit of money it takes to attend an often low-budget school.

Vouchers, it is often said, involve "risky and radical change [that] is unjustified and dangerous."[39] But there would seem to be nothing risky about a program on the small scale proposed here. Of course, if it proves to be a success—by any one of a number of criteria—then the public school system in its present form would be placed in jeopardy. If the public schools cannot compete with private and parochial schools, then they will deserve to go down to defeat.[40]

The pilot program proposed here is feasible and modest. It would allow a bold and radical educational idea to be explored without resort to radical action. The proposal has other strengths. Starting small means small-scale information problems. Children who need help fast (and who are chosen to participate in the experimental group) can simply be moved out of the schools they are currently in and into ones of their choice. In Boston at least, there appears to be available classroom space. The problem of class bias that many fear will infect any system of choice can't arise; the relatively educated and affluent families who might benefit most from options in a comprehensive choice system will not (at the outset) be eligible for participation in this one. Finally, no funds are provided for kids already enrolled in private and denominational schools. The students whose parents are already saving the public system money would continue to do so.

No part of this proposal is original; it borrows heavily from what others have either done or suggested, as the frequent references to the work of Coons and others indicate. Choice is popping out all over. Some plans seem clearly white and middle class in inspiration; others are the work of black advocates who have become angry at the state of inner-city education. In Milwaukee black frustration has led to a voucher movement; in Detroit, the president of the school board (who is black) is putting together a system of citywide choice. Schools will be community controlled and autonomous from the school board and central bureaucracy. The advocates for disadvantaged urban families have been especially important in confirming my own sense that educational options have broad appeal.

A Final Word

Real choice within public schools is easy to champion. There are no good arguments for involuntary assignments within the public system. But vouchers are a more difficult question. A strong case can be made for giving parents, whatever their economic means, the opportunity to choose a private or denominational education for their children. It is time to explore vouchers, but we must proceed cautiously.

Educational reformers usually mobilize political support, ram through policy changes, and then deal with the consequences—intended and unintended. The voucher experiment in Milwaukee followed this familiar pattern. The plan proposed here takes a different tack. It would allow a test first—a trial run. Further action would come only after some results were in. Policymakers would know more of what to expect.[41]

I have argued that consumer choice may not produce sound education but that parents should be allowed to choose among quality schools. I may be wrong of course. Market enthusiasts may turn out to be right in placing their confidence in competition. The pilot test will not settle that question; the participating students will be moved into existing private and parochial schools that have room. These schools are not likely to redefine their mission to meet consumer demand, nor will new schools arise in response to the availability of a limited number of vouchers. Since by design all participants will be from low-income families, we will not learn whether providers would emerge catering specifically to different socioeconomic classes of students, exacerbating the existing stratification of schooling. Nor will we learn about the problem of unscrupulous entrepreneurs with little commitment to education. Would they launch new inner-city schools, still worse than our urban public schools, that cater to disadvantaged children?

Yet the trial run may answer other questions. Are the participating students attending school more regularly than their peers in the control group? Are they experiencing fewer disciplinary or behavioral problems? Do they seem to be moving ahead academically at a faster pace? Are they scoring better on standardized tests? Do parents seem more attentive to their children's education? Is there a difference between the two groups in the level of family satisfaction? These are questions a voucher test involving elementary school students might answer. If older students were to participate, other questions could be added. Are the students taking more challenging courses? Are they staying in school in larger numbers? Are they graduating better prepared for higher education or work?[42]

We have reached the point of crisis in American education, most people in education, business, and political circles seem to agree. If so, we need to be trying a variety of reforms, expanded parental options among them. It is hard to imagine that education can long fight the culture of choice that envelops us.[43] As Americans, we love variety and individualized products and services. We rebel against programmed lives. If choice is the choice of so many people, education cannot hold out long.

NOTES

Chapter One

1. *Wall Street Journal*, 5 April 1991, A14. In its modern guise, the concept of educational choice was first floated by the free market economist Milton Friedman in 1962 (*Capitalism and Freedom*). Subsequently President Nixon initiated a five-year (1972–1977) voucher demonstration in the Alum Rock Unified School District in California. President Reagan pushed parental choice hard and in 1985 the Republicans introduced a bill that would have provided vouchers for educationally disadvantaged students. Some liberals have also embraced the idea. See Christopher R. Jencks, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 40.

2. A 1989 Gallup poll asked "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live?" Sixty percent of respondents said they favored choice. Alex M. Gallup and David Clark, "The 21st Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Spetember 1989. The sixty percent figure is eleven points lower than that reported in 1987, but the wording of the question was somewhat different at that time. Lieberman points out that support for choice in the abstract is not the same as support for a particular choice program, and thus the responses are of limited value. One the other hand, he seems not to question the finding that the poor are generally fans of choice—specifically of vouchers. Myron Lieberman, *Privatization and Educational Choice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 249.

3. Controlled choice plans have been adopted by Cambridge (1981), Boston (1989), Lowell (1987), Lawrence (1988), and Fall River (1988). Until 1989, Worcester had resisted controlled choice, opting instead to retain its magnet school plan. However, at that time, it agreed to move to a controlled choice plan if its schools were not ethnically and racially balanced two years later.

4. *U.S. News & World Report* has called Minnesota's "postsecondary options" program "the clearest success of choice" ("The Uncertain Benefits of Schools Choice," 6 November 1989, p. 82).

Chapter Two

1. Myron Lieberman, *Privatization and Educational Choice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 236.

2. Coons has written extensively on the choice question. See, for example, John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); John E. Coons, "Making Schools Public," in Edward McGlynn Gaffney, Jr., ed., *Private Schools and the Public Good: Policy Alternatives for the Eighties* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); John E. Coons, "Choice Plans Should Include Private Option," *Education Week*, 17 January 1990, p. 36.

3. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962). See also Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

4. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).

5. The following descriptions of controlled choice plans in Massachusetts are based on a variety of sources. These sources, too numerous to list in their entirety, include personal confidential interviews; literature put out by the individual school districts and other agencies in the affected cities, such as the Lowell, Massachusetts Chapter 636 Mid-Year Evaluation Report, "Promoting Integration and School Improvement in the Lowell Public Schools," prepared by the Center for Field Services and Studies, University of Lowell, April 1989; literature published by the Massachusetts Department of Education, Office of Educational Equity (formerly the Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity), such as "Family Choice and Public Schools" (a report to the state board of education, January 1986) and "Schools for the City: Desegregation in Massachusetts 1987–88 Annual Report" (May 1988); and specific studies by scholars and others involved in the choice issue, such as Christine Rossell and Charles L. Glenn, "The Benefits and Costs of Parent Choice for Schools: The Cambridge and Buffalo Models," Boston University, Center for Applied Social Science, 1987; Evans Clinchy, "Planning for Schools of Choice: Achieving Equity and Excellence, Book I: Rationale," New England Center for Equity Assistance, Andover, Massachusetts, March 1989; and Evans Clinchy, "Public Schools of Choice: School Reform in the Desegregating Urban Districts of Massachusetts," unpublished paper, February 1989.

Sources for the information in table 2-1 are as follows. Cambridge data: Burt Giroux, Cambridge Public Schools. Boston data: Roger Cunningham, Boston Public Schools. Worcester data: Roland Charpentier, Worcester

Public Schools. Fall River data: Jim Wallace, Fall River Public Schools. Lawrence data: Kathleen Halback and Richard Hoffman, Lawrence Public Schools. Lowell data: George Tsapatsaris and Mrs. Paris, secretary to the superintendent, Lowell Public Schools.

6. The literature on white flight as a consequence of busing is extensive. A good place to begin is with Christine Rossell's discussion in *The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregation Policy: Magnet Schools or Forced Busing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 13–19. See also David J. Armor, "White Flight and the Future of School Desegregation," in Walter G. Stephan and Joseph R. Feagin, eds., *School Desegregation: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).

7. "Preparing a Minority Deisolation Plan for the Worcester Public Schools: Some Facts and Figures," Worcester Municipal Research Bureau, Inc., 20 November 1989.

8. The evidence for neighborhood preference is quite extensive. See the December 1990 *Boston Globe* poll indicating that "there was support across all racial and ethnic lines for the notion of returning to the old system of sending children to schools in their neighborhoods. Sixty-nine percent of white parents, 51 percent of black parents, and 57 percent of Hispanic parents favored a return to neighborhood schools" (23 December 1990, p. 28).

9. Memorandum, 16 April 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr., pp. 14–15.

10. Memorandum, 2 August 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr., on Boston Assignments for 1990–91.

11. The exam high schools are included in the involuntary assignment figures. Memorandum, 8 February 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr., p. 9.

12. Thus, the Smiths, a white family, might prefer South Boston High School. But the Smiths know that South Boston is popular; many white families list it as their first choice. If they list South Boston High first and a less popular school as their second choice, they may end up with neither. Both schools may already be filled when their application is reviewed. They may have to settle for a school they really detest. They may decide, as a consequence, to list their third through fifth choices, increasing their chance of admission to an at least acceptable school. They may play it safer, in other words. Let's say they do get into the school they listed first. The Smiths will be counted among those who got their first choice. In fact, they got into a school that was more acceptable than their likely alternatives.

13. Testimony at Boston school committee public hearing, 13 November 1990, as reported by Virginia Straus, Co-Director of the Pioneer Institute, who attended the meeting. Straus, personal notes.

14. Confidential interviews and observation first alerted me to this process, confirmed (as subsequent text indicates) by official state literature.

15. "The Boston/Chelsea Urban Team After One Year," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Education, October 1990, p. 7.

16. "Controlled Choice in Boston: The First Year," Massachusetts Department of Education, Office of Educational Equity, April 1990, p. 32.

17. Memorandum, 2 August 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Raynolds, pp. 2, 3, 4. See also Memorandum, 6 October 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Reynolds, p. 4.

18. Information based on observation and confidential interviews in Lowell.

19. Conversation between Virginia Straus of the Pioneer Institute and Charles Glenn, November 13, 1990. The point is also made in more abbreviated form, in Charles Glenn, "School Choice in Massachusetts: Answering the Critics," unpublished paper, November 1990, p. 19.

20. Parent surveys have been conducted in a number of districts to gauge parental satisfaction with controlled choice. While parents are generally positive, the Office of Educational Equity volunteers that the surveys would not withstand methodological scrutiny. Conversation between Virginia Straus and Charles Glenn, 4 January 1991.

21. Glenn, "School Choice in Massachusetts," p. 13.

22. Choice has been compromised in South Boston High because whites who listed the school as their first choice had to relinquish their seats to blacks who wanted to go elsewhere. That is the only situation, Glenn suggests, in which racial guidelines have a negative impact upon choice. Charles Glenn, "School Choice in Massachusetts," pp. 12–17.

23. Glenn writes, "So long as children are simply assigned to schools involuntarily on the basis of where they live..." (Ibid. p. 11).

24. See note 8 above.

25. Testimony of Douglas Johnson, 13 November 1990, Boston school committee public hearing, as reported in the Boston school committee report for 13 and 20 November 1990.

26. Imagine a system with 100 students. Currently, the computer randomly assigns each student a number from 1 to 100. One student at a time, beginning with the student holding the first number, the computer examines the stated school choices of the student and attempts to honor them. If the seats in his

or her first-choice school are filled, the computer tries out the second choice. If all choices are closed out, the student's assignment is deferred to the second round, where a similar process is followed. Once successfully assigned, the computer moves on to the student with the next number until it has tried to place all students. Racial controls are realized by designating a certain number of seats in each school to local children or children of a given ethnic group. If the child to be assigned is black and the remaining seats are reserved for white children, the computer moves on to the next choice school. Removing these controls is as simple as not reserving seats for certain children.

27. Christine Rossell, *The Carrot or the Stick.*

28. An early and influential challenge to the assumption that economic resources of various kinds made a difference came from James Coleman in his 1966 study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1966). Countless subsequent studies have come to the same conclusion. A critical summary of the effective school research is Stewart C. Purkey and Marshall S. Smith, "Effective Schools: A Review," *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 83 (March 1983), pp. 427–52. See also the discussion of good schools in Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster and Tamar Gendler, "High Schools with Character" (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, August 1990), as well as Chubb and Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools*, pp. 193–99. Chubb and Moe state flatly that "money is not what makes some schools more effective than others" (p. 193).

29. Again, involuntary assignments drive parents away from the system—and by logical extension, keep them away. On white flight see note 6 above.

30. For a good discussion of this point, see Patricia M. Lines, "The Denial of Choice and *Brown v. Board of Education*," *Metropolitan Education* (Spring 1987), pp. 108–127.

31. "Public Attitudes toward Education Issues," a MassInsight Survey conducted by Opinion Dynamics Corporation, October 1990, pp. 4, 21.

32. See Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 196. The NORC data is particularly telling.

33. Conference on choice, Brookings Institution, 8 June 1990, carried on C-SPAN.

34. *New York Times*, 10 January 1991, p. 1.

35. The *Worcester Telegram and Gazette* reported on 20 December 1989 that Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Harold Raynolds, Jr., "said he thought Worcester would work to improve the plan because the city needs

money for a new school, and because the city receives over $1 million a year in state magnet school money which may also be in jeopardy" (pp. 1,8).

36. Morgan v. Nucci, 831 F.2d 313 (1st Cir. 1987).

37. 831 F.2d at 318, quoting Dayton Board of Education v. Brinkman (1977).

38. Insisting that school districts do no more than is practical in the way of desegregation "serves the broader objective of ensuring that the courts do not intervene in school affairs any longer than is strictly necessary" (831 F.2d at 324).

39. "Where a court has reason to believe that a discriminatory animus still taints local decision making," the court said, "it may be appropriate for the court to retain jurisdiction for some period after neutral procedures have been implemented." By implication, in the absence of such discriminatory animus, it is inappropriate for the court to maintain jurisdiction. 831 F.2d at 321.

40. "Minority presence in the power structure is a factor that might be expected to help prevent regression to a dual system once the court's presence is withdrawn. See Riddick...(noting that the racial integration of Norfolk's school board made discriminatory funding unlikely)" (831 F.2d at 321). As in Norfolk, blacks serve on the Boston school committee.

41. 831 F.2d at 321.

42. 831 F.2d at 323.

43. 831 F.2d at 324–5, quoting Justice Powell in Estes v. Metropolitan Brancies of the Dallas NAACP (1980).

44. Crawford v. Los Angeles Board of Education, 458 U.S. 526 (1982) and Oklahoma City Board of Education v. Dowell, 59 L.W. 4061 (1991).

45. 458 U.S. at 539.

46. Ibid.

47. 458 U.S. at 537. "The benefit it seeks to confer—neighborhood schooling—is made available regardless of race in the discretion of school boards." In a footnote, the Court adds: "A neighborhood school policy in itself does not offend the Fourteenth Amendment" (n. 15, quoting Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg [1971]).

48. 458 U.S. at 544.

49. 458 U.S. at 545. "Even if we could assume that Proposition I had a disproportionate adverse effect on racial minorities, we see no reason to challenge the Court of Appeals' conclusion that the voters of the state were not motivated by a discriminatory purpose."

Massachusetts desegregation advocates argue that a state court decision in a case involving busing in Springfield (366 Mass. 315 [1974]) prohibits any retreat from a commitment to busing. But that decision rested on constitutional, not state statutory grounds, and is thus overridden by subsequent federal rulings on the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment.

50. Oklahoma City Board of Education v. Dowell, 59 L.W. 4061 (1991).

51. 59 L.W. at 4064–5.

52. 59 L.W. at 4064.

53. Ibid., italics added.

54. Ibid.

55. 59 L.W. at 4063.

56. School Committee of Springfield v. Board of Education, 365 Mass. 215, 318 (1974): "Puerto Ricans [and by extension other Hispanics] are not generally classified as 'non-white' for purposes of the racial imbalance law." The "ethnic composition" of a school is not relevant to the statute (at 228). The legislative history of the 1965 statute refers only to black ("Negro") children. This was never disputed in the controversy over Worcester. See memorandum, Charles Glenn, 21 September 1989.

57. School Committee of Springfield vs. Board of Education, 366 Mass. 315 (1974).

58. Thus the Charles Glenn memo of 21 September argued: "The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, in a case involving Springfield but affecting all Massachusetts school districts, ruled that the Board of Education has an obligation and authority to order remedies to the unconstitutional isolation of minority students as well as to the 'racial imbalance' of 'non-white' students and further, that any actions taken to reverse or impede previously adopted measures would violate the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution." The last point is clearly incorrect; school districts can—as I have argued—reverse course.

Chapter Three

1. Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster and Tamar Gendler, "High Schools with Character" (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, August 1990), p. 28.

2. Robert Peterkin, remarks at conference, "Choice and Control in American Education," University of Wisconsin at Madison, 17-19 May 1989.

3. *New York Times*, 3 May 1989, B2.

4. Personal interviews.

5. The Alum Rock school district in Santa Clara County, California, briefly experimented with vouchers in the early 1970s and the results were sobering. The county has a predominantly minority and socially disadvantaged population, and despite a four-year publicity campaign that involved mailings, newspapers, radio announcements, neighborhood meetings and information counselors, a quarter of the residents remained unaware of the program. The least informed were Mexican Americans, followed by blacks; whites (more highly educated in general) became most knowledgeable. Carol Blue Muller, "The Social and Political Consequences of Increased Public Support for Private Schools," in Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, *Public Dollars for Private Schools: The Case of Tuition Tax Credits* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), p. 49; Michael A. Olivas, "Information Inequities: A Fatal Flaw in Parochiaid Plans," in Edward McGlynn Gaffney, Jr., ed., *Private Schools and the Public Good* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 133-52.

6. Nicholas Lemann, "A False Panacea," *Atlantic* (January 1991), p. 104. Lemann is making the point with reference to vouchers but it obviously extends to public school choice.

7. Myron Lieberman, *Public School Choice: Current Issues/Future Prospects* (Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co., 1990), p. 57.

8. Independence Issue Paper No. 11-89, Independence Institute, Golden, Colorado, 8 December 1989, p. 3.

9. Hill, Foster and Gendler, "High Schools with Character," p. 29.

10. Personal interviews. Fall River conducted parent opinion exit surveys during the kindergarten registration cycles in the spring of 1990 and found that the main reason parents selected their first-choice schools was proximity to home. Other reasons were another child in school; liked school atmosphere; closest to baby-sitter; and extended day and day care programs. A small minority indicated that they liked the school programs, meaning, I would assume, what the school offered in the way of academic instruction. But the precise percentage is not clear since the survey lumped "school atmosphere" and school programs together. Seventeen percent of parents listed the two reasons as behind their decision to select a particular school. Letter, 19 December 1990, James A. Wallace, Equal Opportunity Planner, Fall River Public Schools to the Pioneer Institute.

11. Personal interview.

12. Olivas, "Information Inequities," p. 139.

13. "Choices: A Guide to School Choice in the Worcester Public Schools 1988-89," Alliance for Education, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1988.

14. Olivas, "Information Inequities," p. 142. More current data will not be available until the 1990 U.S. Census has been compiled.

15. I have taken the teacher turnover point from Myron Lieberman who notes that the "information problems of public school choice are exacerbated by the turnover in public schools" *(Public School Choice*, p. 81).

16. Low-income families rely heavily on informal channels of communication, one study of food stamps found. Cited in Olivas, "Information Inequities," p. 140. With respect to schools, the word of friends and neighbors is probably very important for middle-class parents as well.

17. Quoted in Edward B. Fiske, "Lessons," *New York Times*, 11 January 1989, B6.

18. Quoted in Lewis J. Perlman, "Time for Some Educational Perestroika in the United States," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 25-31 December 1989, p. 24.

19. *Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report of Education*, National Governors' Association for Policy Research and Analysis, Washington, D.C., 1986, p. 12.

20. "The Right to Choose: Public School Choice and the Future of American Education," Education Policy Paper No. 2, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Center for Educational Innovation, New York, 1989, p. 29.

21. *Boston Globe*, 10 March 1989, p. 2.

22. For instance, this is the view of Michael Alves, a Boston educational consultant and an architect of controlled choice. Choice tells us which schools are wanting and shames them through exposure. Schools don't like to be scrutinized; they don't like pressure from the central administration to shape up; and they would prefer to have students who want to be there. Author interview with Alves, 9 June 1989.

23. "The Boston/Chelsea Urban Team After One Year," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Education, October 1990.

24. "The Rebirth of America's Oldest Public School System: Redefining Responsibility," report of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on School Reform, 1 May 1989, p. 13.

25. David W. Breneman, "Where Would Tuition Tax Credits Take Us? Should We Agree to Go?" in James and Levin, *Public Dollars*, p. 111.

26. John E. Chubb in the question and answer section of "The Right to Choose," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, p. 29.

27. "Investing in Our Children," Committee for Economic Development, quoted in *Education Week*, 24 June 1987, C2.

28. *Education Week*, 24 June 1987, C4.

29. Evans Clinchy, "Planning for Schools of Choice: Achieving Equity and Excellence, Book I: Rationale," The New England Center for Equity Assistance, Andover, Massachusetts, March 1989, p. 20.

30. David K. Cohen, "Teaching Practice: Plus Ça Change...," unpublished paper, pp. 26–27, available from the National Center for Research on Teacher Education, Michigan State University.

31. Ibid., p. 67.

32. Hill, Foster and Gendler, "High Schools with Character," passim.

33. Albert Shanker, "The End of the Traditional Model of Schooling—and a Proposal for Using Incentives to Restructure Our Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1990, reprinted in Educational Excellence Network, *Network News & Views*, vol. ix, no. 5 (May 1990), p. 26.

34. Thus Evans Clinchy has argued that "we cannot devise—nor should we attempt to devise—a single, standardized form of schooling that will fully and fairly educate all children" (*Education Week*, 24 June 1987, C3). In "Public School Choice: Absolutely Necessary But Not Wholly Sufficient" (unpublished paper, April 1989), Clinchy elaborates the point at length. "What we need to create," he says, "is a genuine diversity of different approaches to schooling, different kinds of schools to serve the large diversity in our student population and the large diversity of belief about what public education should be and do in our parent and professional populations" (p. 4). Seymour Fliegel makes the same point. The aim of District 4 (East Harlem), he says, has been "to create a system that—instead of trying to fit students into some standardized school—has a school to fit every student in this district. No one gets left out, no one gets lost. Every kid is important, every kid can learn if you put him or her in the right environment. But since kids have this huge range of different needs, different interests and different ways of learning, we've got to have a wide diversity of schools" (Clinchy, *Planning for Schools of Choice*, p. 7).

35. *Education Week*, 24 June 1987.

36. Thus John Chubb argues that one of the distinguishing characteristics of high performance schools is a sense of mission. See John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990), passim. See also John E. Chubb, "Why the Current Wave of School Reform Will Fail," *The Public Interest*, no. 90 (Winter 1988), pp. 28–49.

37. Some choice advocates make the point in slightly modified form. They say that while diversity is perhaps not quite inevitable, choice allows it to

happen. See Bill Honig, superintendent of public instruction in California, in *Education Week*, 14 June 1987, C3.

38. "Schools of Choice," Fall River Public Schools, undated brochure.

39. I have paraphrased and embellished Shanker, "If Teachers Get New Choices, Shouldn't Parents?" *New York Times*, 18 June 1989, E7. Shanker is not alone, of course, in making this argument. See "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century," report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, May 1986.

40. Chubb and Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, pp. 200–201.

41. Author interview with Evans Clinchy, 11 May 1989.

42. Author interview with Charles Glenn, 8 May 1989.

43. William J. Bennett, *American Education: Making It Work*, U.S. Department of Education, April 1988, p. 44.

44. Edward B. Fiske, "Lessons," *New York Times*, 14 February 1990, B6.

45. *Education Week*, 1 November 1989, reprinted in Educational Excellence Network, *Network News & Views* (December 1989), p. 100.

46. Don Yaeger, "Fixing America's Failing Schools," reprint of series from the *Florida-Times Union*, 22 October through 2 November 1989, p. 9. Likewise in another famous choice district: California's Richmond Unified School District, the plans were what Myron Lieberman calls "a management initiative" (Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, p. 49).

47. Lemann, "A False Panacea," p. 105.

48. Hill, Foster and Gendler, "High Schools with Character," p. 79.

49. Mary Ann Raywid, "The Mounting Case for Schools of Choice," in Joe Nathan, ed., *Public Schools By Choice: Expanding Opportunities for Parents, Students, and Teachers* (St. Paul, MN: The Institute for Learning and Teaching, 1989), pp. 13–40. See also Raywid, "The Current Status of Schools of Choice in Public Secondary Education," Project on Alternatives in Education, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, 1982.

50. Hill, Foster and Gendler, "High Schools with Character," pp. 26, 58.

51. Ibid., p. vii.

52. *Time for Results*, p. 83.

53. Chubb and Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools*, pp. 147–150 and 163–65.

54. Albert Shanker, "Why Moby Dick Fought at Concord," *New York Times*, 1 April 1990, E7. Coleman's findings are in James S. Coleman and Thomas

Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

55. Mark A. Kutner and Laura H. Salganick, *Educational Choice in New York District 4*, cited in CRS Report for Congress, *Public School Choice: Recent Developments and Analysis of Issues*, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 5 April 1989.

56. Hill, Foster and Gendler, "High Schools with Character," p. 11.

57. Ibid., p. 28.

58. Ibid., pp. 51–52.

59. As Chubb and Moe put the point, "Parents with children in successful schools—parents who tend to be above average in SES [socioeconomic status]—tend to monitor their children's school work more closely and to expect more from their children academically than parents with children in unsuccessful schools.... It is reasonable to suppose that parents who are higher in SES will be at least somewhat more likely than other parents to support teachers and principals if and when they decide to impose serious academic demands on students" (*Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, p. 164).

60. Christine Rossell review of draft manuscript.

61. Memorandum, 16 April 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr., p. 2. As Christine Rossell has pointed out to me, the percentage of families with school-age children may have declined (Rossell review of draft manuscript).

62. The Fall River point is made in a letter to the Pioneer Institute from James A. Wallace, Equal Educational Opportunity Planner, Fall River Public Schools, 19 December 1990. For further information on Cambridge, see Michael J. Alves and Charles V. Willie, "Controlled Choice Assignments: A New and More Effective Approach to School Desegregation," *Urban Review*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1987), p. 86; Christine Rossell and Charles Glenn, "The Cambridge Controlled Choice Plan," *Urban Review*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1988), p. 86. I am indebted to Christine Rossell for spelling out, in a conversation, a number of points in this paragraph.

63. David J. Armor, "The Worcester Survey of Alternative Deisolation Options," unpublished paper prepared for the Worcester School Committee, 4 December 1989, pp. 16–17. A large majority of white parents and a substantial plurality of those who are black in Worcester opposed mandatory busing. Sixty-six percent of Hispanic parents, however, supported it, 37 percent strongly. Armor is careful to note that the response of the white parents is not a reflection of racial or ethnic intolerance. Other questions in

the survey make clear that "it is not increased minority contact that leads to white flight, but rather loss of control over choice of schools...."

64. Memorandum, John Coakley to Charles Glenn, 4 June 1984, cited in Rossell and Glenn, "The Cambridge Controlled Choice Plan," p. 91.

65. Joe Nathan, "Progress, Problems, and Prospects with State Choice Plans," in Nathan, ed., *Public Schools by Choice*, p. 28.

66. This point is widely accepted. For instance, the *New York Times* has noted with respect to the record of the chancellor of New York City's public schools that, ultimately, "Mr. Fernandez will still be judged by his ability to have students learn to read, write and calculate, not by how many principals he has dismissed" (10 March 1990, p. 29). On the other hand, Myron Lieberman argues that better academic results should not be the bottom line. Choice will have proven its merit, he says, if the *same* education can be had for half the cost and with the added benefit of enhanced freedom for families. Lieberman review of draft manuscript, telephone conversation with Virginia Straus of Pioneer Institute, 13 August 1990.

67. These are National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results as reported in Albert Shanker, "What Kids Really Know," *New York Times*, paid advertisement, 29 October 1989, E7.

68. The figures come from *Boston Globe*, 18 February 1990, p. 40, and from the Mayor's Advisory Report of 1 May 1989, appendixes B and C, unpaginated.

69. *Education Week*, 1 November 1989, reprinted in *Network News & Views*, December 1989, p. 100.

70. Seymour Fliegel, "Parental Choice in East Harlem Schools," in Nathan, ed., *Public Schools By Choice*, pp. 96, 104–105.

71. Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, p. 60.

72. Edward B. Fiske, "Parental Choice in Public Schools Gains," *New York Times*, 11 July 1988, p. 1.

73. Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, pp. 59–60.

74. Amy Stuart Wells, "Quest for Improving Schools," *New York Times*, 14 March 1990, B8.

75. *Boston Globe*, 17 April 1990, p. 10.

76. Alves and Willie, "Controlled Choice Assignments: A New and More Effective Approach to School Desegregation," pp. 67-87.

77. Rossell and Glenn, "The Cambridge Controlled Choice Plan," p. 90.

78. Lieberman, *Privatization*, pp. 180–181.

79. "Once schools have the chance to develop a sense of common purpose and reciprocal obligation among students, faculty, adminsitration, and parents, choice facilitates their continuation," the Rand report argues. But, it goes on, "choice alone, without a prior effort to create strong, mission-oriented schools, will produce only confusion and disappointment" (Hill, Foster, and Gendler, "High Schools with Character," p. 76).

80. At the moment, Boston parents are overwhelmingly making their neighborhood school their first choice under the new controlled choice plan. Memorandum, 16 April 1990, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr.

81. This point was made well by a parent talking on "Face the Nation" about the decentralized, neighborhood school system in Chicago (10 June 1990).

82. Chester E. Finn, Jr., "The Choice Backlash," *National Review*, 10 November 1989, p. 32.

83. John E. Coons, "The Role of the Family in Educational Decision Making: A Conflict between Liberty and Equality?" in Goldstein, ed., *Law and Equality in Education* (Jerusalem, Israel: Van Leer Institute, 1980), p. 164.

84. William Snider, "Washington Lawmakers Adopt School-Choice Package," *Education Week*, 11 April 1990, reprinted in Educational Excellence Network, *Network News & Views*, vol. ix, no. 5 (May 1990), p. 57; "Choosing Better Schools," U.S. Department of Education, (December 1990), p. 3.

85. I am indebted to Chester E. Finn for this point (Finn review of draft manuscript).

Chapter Four

1. In addition to Metco, Massachusetts students have long crossed district lines to attend vocational education schools or to participate in bilingual or special education programs. *Boston Globe*, 17 April 1990, p. 10.

2. "Choosing Better Schools," U.S. Department of Education, December 1990, p. 7.

3. In Minnesota and elsewhere the law makes participation mandatory. Inevitably there is a loophole, however. No district that is "full" can be asked to take interdistrict transfers and only the district itself can determine its capacity. Also, schools have more subtle ways of discouraging the transfers they do not want.

4. Telephone conversations, 18 April 1991, Pioneer staff member and Barbara Zohn, enrollment options program specialist, Minnesota Department of

Education and Rod Reese, research analyst, finance division, Minnesota Department of Education.

5. Myron Lieberman, *Privatization and Educational Choice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 180.

6. Competition will mean that schools will have to "perform or perish," Stephen D. Sugarman and John E. Coons have written. "How to End the Public School Monopoly," *Business and Society Review*, no. 35 (Fall 1980), p. 31. It should be noted that choice proponents are far from unanimous on the point. Those who celebrate the controlled choice programs in Cambridge and elsewhere argue that the system has worked to improve schools, despite the fact that no school is threatened with empty classroom seats.

7. Charles Glenn, "The Fear of Freedom: Politics and Parent Choice of Schools," draft report, January 1989, p.30.

8. *Newsweek*, 31 July 1989, p. 56; *Education Week*, 2 August 1989, p. 28.

9. *Newsweek*, 19 September 1988, p. 77.

10. Bella Rosenberg, "Public School Choice: Can We Find the Right Balance?" *American Educator* (Summer 1989), p. 41; *Newsweek*, 19 September 1988, p. 77.

11. *Newsweek*, 19 September 1988, p. 77.

12. This Canton example is based on research done by my research assistant, Christine Dooley. For those who are interested in the Canton data in full, the Pioneer Institute has it on file.

13. Avon will not accept special needs students unless their home town foots the entire bill. Regular transfer students enrich the regular programs; special needs students cannot serve that function.

14. *Boston Sunday Globe*, 25 November 1990, West pp. 1, 9.

15. *Boston Globe*, 10 June 1990, p. 30. *Boston Sunday Globe*, 25 November 1990, West p. 9.

16. *Boston Sunday Globe*, 25 November 1990, West p. 9.

17. Albert Shanker, "Competition and Choice: But Will Schools Improve?" *New York Times*, 12 February 1989, E7.

18. Confidential interview.

19. The Wisconsin interdistrict choice plan is described in George A. Mitchell, "An Evaluation of State-Financed School Integration in Metropolitan Milwaukee," a report of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, vol. 2, no. 5, June 1989.

20. *Boston Globe*, 17 April 1990, p. 10.

21. "Preparing a Minority Deisolation Plan for the Worcester Public Schools: Some Facts and Figures," Worcester Municipal Research Bureau, Inc., 20 November 1989. Charles Glenn has disputed this figure. In response to the Municipal Bureau's report, he wrote: "The parent information staff is three people, costing $106,569. There are also 14 parent liaisons working out of the schools for parent involvement" (Memorandum, 7 November 1989, Charles Glenn to Roberta R. Schaefer). But the author of the Worcester report (Schaefer) got her information directly from Lawrence school authorities, and Glenn does not put a price on the 14 parent liaisons. He does not directly dispute the $400,000 figure, in other words.

22. Memorandum, 7 November 1989, Glenn to Schaefer.

23. The *intra*district choice programs are generally heavily staffed with information personnel. In Cambridge there are people in the central office and parent liaisons in each school. The staffing needs would presumably be much greater with students coming from outside the district.

24. Amy Stuart Wells, "Quest for Improving Schools Finds Role for Free Market," *New York Times*, 14 March 1990, B8.

25. *Education Week*, 1 November 1989, reprinted in Educational Excellence Network, *Network News & Views* (December 1989), p. 100.

26. Quoted in Wells, "Quest for Improving Schools," B8.

27. In the face of declining enrollments, the town of Marblehead has chosen to retain teachers and make do in other areas. The town believes its teachers to be its greatest single resource and is pleased to get class size down.

28. "Students' right to switch puts schools to the test," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 March 1990, reprinted in *Network News & Views* (May 1990), p. 59.

29. Mitchell, "An Evaluation of State-Financed School Integration in Metropolitan Milwaukee," p. 14.

30. The consensus among social scientists is that school funding is not a crucial factor in how much students learn. But that finding does not contradict my basic point, that no parent with a choice between a fancy-looking school in Andover, where the paint is fresh and computers dot every room, is going to transfer a child into a school in Lawrence where computers are in short supply and the paint doesn't look too good. Parents may be misguided but they care about surroundings and equipment.

31. Patrick Welsh, *Tales Out of School* (New York: Viking Penquin, Inc., 1986), chapter 4.

32. The legislation provided that the formula covering special education and bilingual students would be different.

33. Charles Glenn gives the example of New Bedford, which receives about $2,500 in state aid. "The Fear of Freedom: Politics and Parent Choice of Schools. Part 2: Creating a Framework for Parent Choice," draft paper, January 1989, p. 26. It can be argued that Senator Bulger's plan simply extended one already in place. Students with certain needs that the local system cannot meet—for vocational education, for instance—are entitled to demand that their home district foot the bill for their education in a district that meets their needs. The number of such demands is obviously limited and the drain on home districts not large, although residential special education placements can occasionally be very costly.

34. In March 1989 Jon Keller and Jonathan Scott of the *Tab* surveyed Boston area school superintendents and found only the most lukewarm enthusiasm for the interdistrict choice plan. The administrators' most widely cited objection, they said, was to the $2,000 limit on state reimbursement. "Doomed to Fail," *Tab*, 7 March 1989, p. 1.

35. "Draft Legislation for Inter-district Parent Choice," memorandum, 4 November 1988, Charles Glenn to Commissioner Raynolds.

36. "When Parents and Students Give the Grades," *US News & World Report*, 2 September 1988, p. 60.

37. Polling data on vouchers indicates that college-educated whites are likely to be the least interested. In general, the higher the social class, the lower the level of enthusiasm. George Gallup, "The Seventeenth Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes towards the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 67, pp. 35–40, as summarized in Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Education Choice: Theory, Practice, and Research," testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations, 22 October 1985.

38. Gallup poll data indicates that persons living in small towns and cities of under 50,000 give the highest rating to their schools. Nathan Glazer, "The Future of Tuition Tax Credits," in Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, *Public Dollars for Private Schools: The Case for Tuition Tax Credits* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1983), p. 91.

39. White working-class parents, when they have a choice, generally select schools that working-class whites attend. When Senate president William Bulger first proposed interdistrict choice for Massachusetts, everyone understood that his South Boston constituents didn't want to send their kids to the Brookline schools; they wanted to be able to go to North Quincy, a white working-class community. Likewise, in Cambridge, the Harrington kids from East Cambridge don't choose the Agassiz school, which is in an affluent, professional neighborhood.

40. Christine H. Rossell, *The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregation Policy: Magnet Schools or Forced Busing* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 116. Rossell's conclusions are based on the work of Melvin L. Kohn ("Occupational Structure and Alienation," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82 [1976], pp. 111–30), and on that of Samuel D. Sieber and David E. Wilder in *The School in Society*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973). Other scholars have made the same point. See, for instance, Henry M. Levin, "The Theory of Choice Applied to Education," paper delivered at conference, "Choice and Control in American Education," University of Wisconsin at Madison, 17–19 May 1989, p. 38; and Myron Lieberman, *Public School Choice: Current Issues/Future Prospects* (Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co., 1990), p. 30.

41. I have grouped blacks and Hispanics together here, despite the validity of the point that Nathan Glazer and others have made about the need to distinguish the two groups. "The educational debate," Glazer has written, "often lumps blacks with Hispanics, but the term *Hispanics* covers a multitude of ethnic groups, and there is no reason to expect any special problem in educational achievement for some of them, such as Cubans....The two large groups of Hispanics with special educational problems are Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans....But there is no such thing as a general minority problem in education....The minority problem in education is overwhelmingly, though by no means exclusively, a problem of blacks" (Glazer, "The Problem with Competence," in John H. Bunzel, ed., *Challenge to American Schools: The Case for Standards and Values* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], pp. 219-220). The point I make seems nevertheless right.

42. *Newsweek*, 31 July 1989, p. 56; *Education Week*, 2 August 1989, pp. 1, 28.

43. Information contained in a Lincoln school committee flyer sent to Lincoln residents in May 1990. The data was collected in January 1990 by Jennifer Donaldson, a Lincoln school committee member.

44. A student who shot his or her geometry teacher should not be forced upon a suburban school, Charles Glenn (the chief architect of the plan) has explained. But agents of the state—not the schools themselves—would handle applications and make assignments, protecting students against arbitrary exclusion. Glenn, "The Fear of Freedom," p. 22.

45. Bulger quoted in *U.S. News and World Report*, 12 September 1988, p. 61.

46. James Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1986.

47. Myron Lieberman notes, "Teacher preferences for high-achieving students are too common to be debatable" (*Public School Choice*, p. 35).

48. Welsh, *Tales*, p. 2.

49. Welsh, *Tales*, p. 3 and chapter 4.

50. "The Rebirth of America's Oldest Public School System: Redefining Responsibility," a report of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on School Reform, 1 May 1989, appendix C, unpaginated.

51. *Education Week*, 1 November 1989, reprinted in *Network News & Views* (December 1989), p. 100.

52. A two-year study of choice made in the secondary schools of New York, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia by Donald R. Moore and Susan Davenport, found that even in schools supposedly available to all students, school officials imposed admissions requirements related to achievement, attendance, and behavior. Cited in Myron Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, p. 33.

53. Myron Lieberman puts this point very well. We might ask, he says, why this "creaming" objection is not applied to public housing. "After all, it could be argued that with housing vouchers, the model tenants would be the first to leave for better housing in safe neighborhoods, thereby leaving other tenants without desirable models to emulate" (*Privatization*, p. 156). If the argument can't be used with respect to housing (and clearly it cannot), why is it acceptable when it comes to education?

54. Nathan Glazer, "The Future of Tuition Tax Credits," in James and Levin, *Public Dollars*, p. 99.

55. Levin, "The Theory of Choice," pp. 26-27.

56. Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, p. 31.

57. *U.S. News & World Report*, 6 November 1989, p. 80.

58. *Newsweek*, 19 September 1988, p. 79; Joe Nathan, "Progress, Problems, and Prospects of State Educational Choice Plans," U.S. Department of Education, unpublished paper, July 1989, p. 17.

59. Nathan, "Progress, Problems, and Prospects," p. 18.

60. Rossell, *The Carrot or the Stick*, p. 139.

61. The precise language is as follows: Each city will be required to amend its existing desegregation plan to "provide for and govern the transfer of students between its schools and other communities" (Glenn, "The Fear of Freedom," p. 24).

62. Mitchell, "An Evaluation of State-Financed School Integration," p. 45. The context in which the remark was made was a discussion of involuntary busing for purposes of integration.

63. *U.S. News & World Report*, 6 November 1989, p. 80.

64. Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, p. 38.

65. "Students' right," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 March 1990, reprinted in *Network News & Views* (May 1990), p. 58.

66. As Myron Lieberman points out, "There is a wealth of evidence that, left to their own devices, many pupils will choose the easiest or most convenient courses. There is no apparent reason why pupils who choose such courses will choose schools any differently" (*Public School Choice*, p. 54).

67. Albert Shanker, "Truth in Advertising," *New York Times*, 21 May 1989, E9.

68. Ibid.

69. Nathan, "Progress, Problems, and Prospects," p. 14.

70. Lieberman, *Public School Choice*, pp. 63–64.

71. Myron Lieberman points out that most parents prefer the closest school even if it is somewhat inferior to others farther away. *Public School Choice*, p. 81.

72. "Students' right," *Network News & Views*, (May 1990), p. 59.

Chapter Five

1. Nicholas Lemann, "A False Panacea," *Atlantic* (January 1991), p. 104.

2. James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), chapter 1.

3. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990), p. 32.

4. See Jeffrey R. Henig, "Interest-based Perspectives on Education Reform: A Critical Assessment," unpublished paper, George Washington University, 21 December 1989.

5. Henry Levin, "The Theory of Choice Applied to Education," paper delivered at conference, "Choice and Control in American Education," University of Wisconsin at Madison, 17–19 May 1989, p. 6.

6. Coleman and Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools*.

7. Abigail Thernstrom, "Outclassed: Why parochial schools beat public ones," *New Republic*, 13 May 1991, pp. 12-14.

8. Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster and Tamar Gendler, "High Schools with Character," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, August 1990).

9. Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1985), chapter 11.

10. Bill Honig, "School Vouchers: Dangerous Claptrap," *New York Times*, 29 June 1990, A25.

11. On the bilingual education record see Rosalie Pedalino Porter, *Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) and Abigail Thernstrom, "Bilingual Miseducation," *Commentary* (February 1990), pp. 44–48.

12. A New York state report, issued in July 1989, reviewed the education department's curriculum and instruction guides and materials "to see if they adequately reflect the pluralistic nature of our society and to identify areas where changes or additions may be needed" ("A Curriculum of Inclusion," report of the Commissioner's Task Force on Minorities, Equity, and Excellence, unpublished). The best commentary on the report is that of Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures," *American Scholar* (Summer 1990).

13. Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures," pp. 340 and 351-352.

14. Chubb and Moe, *Politics, Markets, & America's Schools*, p. 38.

15. Telephone conversation between Virginia Straus and Myron Lieberman, 13 August 1990, following review of draft manuscript.

16. The McDonald's example is taken from James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 113, and the entire ensuing discussion of why public bureaucracies are particular problems relies on his analysis.

17. On the other hand, as Myron Lieberman points out, affluent suburban schools function well with large bureaucracies. Do they function well in spite of the administrative presence, or is the entire point wrong? Lieberman suggests the latter. (Review of draft manuscript.) In discussing the success of the parochial schools, a recent RAND report stresses the importance of the freedom from bureaucratic constraints. Hill, Foster and Gendler, "High Schools with Character."

18. The conscription image is John Coons's from testimony before the President's Commission on Privatization, 22 December 1987, p. 4.

19. James Coleman, "Do Students Learn More in Private Schools Than in Public Schools?" paper prepared for the Fifth Annual Critical Issues Symposium, "Improving the Quality of Education in the United States," held at the Florida State Conference Center in Tallahassee, Florida, 16–18 March

1989. I have taken the liberty of extending Coleman's point a bit, since he does not explicitly make the argument about loyalty. It's implicit, however, it seems to me.

20. See, for instance, Stephen Arons, *Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1983).

21. I am indebted to Christine Rossell for help in the design of the pilot program. Rossell suggests that if the selection process cannot be random, the best control group would be siblings not in the program. Rossell review of draft manuscript.

22. John E. Coons and Steven D. Sugarman have also been concerned that students participating in a voucher program be selected in some neutral manner, so that any academic progress they make can be clearly linked to their freedom to choose a school. Their idea would be to provide scholarships to students in families living in a particular city block or housing unit. Memorandum to Business Leaders Interested in Schools, Re: Private Scholarships for Choice Among Private Schools, undated.

23. Joseph L. Bast of the Heartland Institute alerted me to this whole point in very useful comments on the first draft of this manuscript.

24. Parochial schools in the Boston area were surveyed by telephone by my research assistant, Romney Resney, in June and July 1990.

25. I am indebted to David Armor for this and other points in this section. He provided a detailed and very useful commentary on the research design. Armor review of draft manuscript.

26. John E. Coons, "Commentary: 'Choice' Plans Should Include Private Option," *Education Week*, 17 January 1990, p. 36.

27. As Myron Lieberman points out, it cannot be assumed that these schools would not raise their tuition if the public was paying. *Privatization and Educational Choice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 127.

28. *Wall Street Journal*, editorial, 14 June 1990, A14.

29. I am indebted to Stephen Bates, an attorney and expert on constitutional questions involving religion and the First Amendment, for the brief summary of relevant holdings in this section. I touch only on the potential constitutional barrier. In fact, choice plans must meet the demands of federal anti-discrimination law as well. But that requirement of nondiscrimination is easily met.

30. Memorandum, 2 August 1990, Michael W. McConnell, professor of law, University of Chicago, to Oregonians for Educational Choice.

31. Court watchers who make the argument that vouchers might pass constitutional muster tend to be voucher proponents. See, for instance, the Heritage Foundation report, "Choice in Education: Part II, Legal Perils and Legal Opportunities," Backgrounder No. 809, 18 February 1991. The Heritage report suggests that "the Court's new composition and its relevant precedents suggest that *bona fide* education choice programs will withstand constitutional scrutiny even if they involve sectarian schools" (p. 6).

32. For a review of the arguments in support of the 1974 amendments, see "State Aid to Private Higher Educational Institutions and Students," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, House report no. 6106, March 1973.

33. Based on data provided by the Archdiocese of Boston and the Boston Municipal Research Bureau.

34. Telephone conversation between Steven Wilson of Pioneer Institute and Cathedral High School staff member, 26 February 1991.

35. Memorandum, Coons and Sugarman to Business Leaders Interested in Schools, undated (but clearly written in early 1990).

36. This very successful program is described in the RAND report by Hill, Foster, and Gendler, "High Schools With Character.

37. Myron Lieberman has a good discussion of these start-up costs. See *Privatization*, pp. 124, 129.

38. Hodding Carter, "In Public Schools, Class Will Tell," op-ed, *New York Times*, 13 June 1990, A31.

39. Honig, "School Vouchers: Dangerous Claptrap," A25.

40. It will rightly be objected that the public schools are now charged by law with a much broader mission than to simply educate children. We have charged the schools with custodial, nutritional, counseling, and even medical responibilities. Most notably, the public schools must provide costly special and bilingual education programs, for which the private schools have no responsibility. But the design of the voucher test, by excluding children with special needs or limited English proficiency, would put all parties on essentially equal footing. The question of the responsibility for all schools to care for all children would, of course, have to be resolved in a large scale voucher proposal.

41. I am indebted to David Armor for this point. Review of draft manuscript.

42. This list borrows heavily from the RAND report, "High Schools with Character." See p. 80.

43. Myron Lieberman makes this point in a slightly different form. *Privatization*, p. 234.

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